

Saipan Tribune

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INSIDE



They've Moved

Capricciosa, which offers Italian cuisine, and Tony Roma's, best known for its ribs, officially open at their new location today in the Garapan district, bringing the best that the two restaurants have to offer that much closer to their loyal patrons.

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Terror A-Bomb

The nuclear black market that let Iran, Libya and North Korea acquire weapons technology from Pakistan under the noses of international monitors raises suspicions that terror groups also acquired bomb components or plans, experts told The Associated Press.

Page 27



Precious Egg

A Russian industrialist privately purchased the Forbes collection of historic Faberge art pieces, including nine rare Imperial Easter Eggs, for an undisclosed sum and ahead of a scheduled auction.

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Govt disconnection looms anew

By LIBERTY DONES
REPORTER

Once again, the Commonwealth Utilities Corp. has warned that it would disconnect services to the central government by next month if it continues to fall behind in its monthly payments.

In a report to the CUC board yesterday, CUC acting comptroller Ed Williams said that March 2004 "may be the time to start disconnecting service to the government if payments are not brought current by the end of February."

He said the government is behind

Off-island trip sparks spirited debate

By LIBERTY DONES
REPORTER

Commonwealth Utilities Corp. board member Laura Manglona is leading a CUC team to attend an Environmental Protection Agency conference in the U.S. mainland.

The upcoming trip was a "hot" issue

by \$1 million for the first three months of FY 2004.

As of December, he said that

discussed by the CUC board during its meeting yesterday, with Saipan board member Joseph Torres inquiring whether CUC Tinian was appropriately informed about it.

"I got a call from Tinian asking about

government payments totaled only \$1.4 million against the expected payment of \$2.4 million.



an EPA conference. Is there such a conference?" asked Torres.

Nobody from the group, including CUC executive director Lorraine A. Babauta, could give details about the trip.

After a while, Manglona, who chairs the committee on finance and the audit and compliance panel, said there is an EPA

See OFF-ISLAND on Page 8

Following a meeting with the Department of Finance on Feb. 3 over the

See GOVT on Page 8

SIA still on bond rating watch list

By EDITH G. ALEJANDRO
REPORTER

The slow rally of the local airline and tourism industries has affected the bond rating of the Commonwealth Ports Authority, forcing a restructuring and a round of study to deflect the problem.

At present, the Saipan International Airport remains on the watch list of the Fitsch IBCA Rating agency, prompting ports officials to hold another round of discussion with its bondholder, the Franklin Fund.



Salas

Next week, CPA officials led by executive director Carlos H. Salas would meet with Franklin Fund officials in San Francisco to discuss the revenue bond rating

See SIA on Page 8



GAS TALKS

Shell Marianas officials met with lawmakers to shed light on the company's recent price increase on petroleum products. Rep. Ray Yumul, who chairs the Commerce and Tourism committee, called for the meeting with Shell Marianas president Phil Stalker, retail manager Fred Keller and executive Jeff Boyer. Others in photo are House vice speaker Timothy Villagomez and Rep. Clyde Norita.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

CPA to collect fee from outbound passengers

By EDITH G. ALEJANDRO
REPORTER

The Commonwealth Ports Authority will begin collecting a \$4.50 passenger facility charge from departing passengers to raise money that would cushion the Saipan International Airport's bond indenture obligations.



This, however, has to be approved first by the Federal Aviation Administration before the CPA can implement it, so there is no specific timeframe yet as to when outbound passengers will start paying for the new charge.

CPA executive director Carlos H.

Salas said the new fee is intended to mitigate the possibility of another year of shortfall on the airport side and to finance the 1.25 bond ratio being implemented by the Franklin Fund.

A portion of the Passenger Facility Fee collection would go toward debt service, while the rest would be used to fund the CPA's 10 percent share of

all grants that it would be getting for the next 10 years.

He stressed, though, that the plan would have to go through proper administrative channels, including applying with the FAA.

The Passenger Facility Fee is similar to terminal/departure fee that all

See CPA on Page 8

Local

CNMI taps federal tax funds

The Babauta administration yesterday disclosed that it has obtained federal funds from previously untapped sources at the U.S. Treasury.

In a media statement released by the Attorney General's Office, the government disclosed receiving some \$210,000 so far from federal coffers.

"Under the terms and provisions of the Covenant to establish the Northern Mariana Islands, the CNMI is entitled to cover over tax funds paid into the

U.S. Treasury by CNMI," the media release stated.

Attorney General Pamela Brown said the CNMI expects to receive additional federal monies this year. The AGO and the CNMI Department of Finance, together with the Governor's Office, managed to unearth the funding source, according to the media statement.

Gov. Juan N. Babauta has reportedly entered into an understanding with the federal

Treasury in connection with the payment of the funds.

"The significant work of the administration affirms the intent of the Covenant and the expressed provisions providing U.S. commitment to financial aid of the CNMI," the media release quoted Babauta as saying. "It further represents the commitment of the Lt. Governor and I to identify all available sources of revenue in these fiscally challenging times."

(John Ravelo)

diabetes
+green

Beautification group sought for Precinct 4

The Office of Rep. Justo S. Quitugua is encouraging volunteers to join efforts in the upkeep of Precinct 4's surroundings.

In a media release, the lawmaker related the precinct's tremendous need for road repairs and beautification cleanups, citing the rundown state of some bus stops and shelters, among others.

"The communities of Precinct 4 are kindly requested to assist in these endeavors by forming a beautification group within each community to joint efforts with [my] office so that these beautification activities are conducted on a

regular basis," said Quitugua.

The Precinct 4 congressman credited the offices of Saipan Mayor Juan Tudela and the Public Works Secretary Juan Reyes for extending their assistance to the precinct's series of beautification projects.

Quitugua said the two agencies have been cooperating with his office in the road repairs and beautification cleanups it has undertaken.

The legislator's community workers are currently working to tidy up precinct 4 road shoulders and bus shelters as part of efforts to beautify the area's surroundings.



Quitugua

trends

House gears up for its first session

By MARIAN A. MARAYA
REPORTER

A slew of bills, local bills and resolutions have been prefiled at the House Clerk's office, totaling 16 as of Thursday morning in anticipation of the first regular House session that is just three days away.

The legislative measures—which largely deals with appropriation for pending projects—were mostly submitted by returning members, most of them congressmen belonging to the Republican minority that had dominated the 13th House of Representatives.

House Clerk Evelyn Fleming confirmed to reporters yesterday that more bills are expected to be filed, especially on the session day itself, which is Feb. 9.

Other members are reportedly still finalizing bills they are poised to introduce. One member is reportedly planning to float as many as 20 measures on Monday.

Asked what can be expected on the 14th House's very first session, Vice Speaker Timothy

Villagomez yesterday said: "A variety of things."

"The leadership has been meeting. But what's more important is that the leadership...has been meeting with some of the agencies for the last couple of weeks and getting input from them. Like I said, we want to hear from them on what the Legislature can do to assist the departments.

"That's what's been keeping us busy and a lot of the bills that we'll be introducing is a result of the efforts from both agencies and Legislature. So it's not just one-sided," said Villagomez.

The Covenant-ruled House will convene for a regular session for the first time on Monday, alongside one Democrat member, seven Republicans and one independent member.

Despite the different party affiliations, the vice speaker expressed optimism that cooperation will rule in this Legislature.

"I think everyone of us has a common goal and that's to help. And that's always been my philosophy and I'm sure that once we go to the chamber,

everyone is going to look at the common good of why we're here," said Villagomez.

The prefiled bills are mostly the same measures that never made it through the previous Legislature.

Among them are House Bill 14-1 by Rep. Joe Guerrero which seeks to appropriate \$5.58 million for 702 CIP Covenant funding for certain CIP in FY03; and HB 14-2 by Rep. David Apatang and other minority members, which

appropriates \$1.5 million for various CIP projects in the three senatorial districts.

Other prefiled House bills include those by Rep. Benjamin Seman: the proposed Nursing Practice Act, Tobacco Settlement Escrow Enforcement Act, Domestic Violence Act, Anti-Stalking Act, sin tax appropriation, Inhalant Abuse

Act and the Commonwealth Respite Service Program.

Rep. Norman Palacios has put forward four bills, including the proposed Tinian Marine Reserve Act; the appropriation of \$575,000 for the Tinian museum; and the proposal to authorize the commercial operation of amusement machines at CNMI's seaports and airports.

Note: with mug of Tim Villagomez.

dehins kasya

conwood

cbcruz

baby news

mcdo

NMHC says grant money is obligated

By LIBERTY DONES
REPORTER

The Northern Marianas Housing Corp. said the nearly \$2 million grant it received from the federal government has been allotted for specific projects as contained in its 2003 action plan.

NMHC board chairman Sixto K. Igisomar said in a statement that some \$1.2 million funding under the Community Development Block Grant will be used to fund the architectural engineering design of the Garapan Water Restoration project; the expansion/renovation of the NMHC office for ADA accessibility; and installation of public bathroom facilities at its office.

He said the Home Investment partnership funding of \$691,000 will enable mortgage loans to eligible families or those "who meet federal income guidelines to build new house or repair their existing homes."

Igisomar said these project funds primarily benefit "low to moderate-income families."

Meantime, he said a \$53,000 emergency shelter grant, while managed by NMHC, is being administered by the Division of Youth Services.

"The administration of the emergency shelter falls under the DYS, which provides emergency shelter care to individuals and families in need," Igisomar said.

NMHC issued the statement as it sought to erase any "impression that the CNMI is receiving funds for new construction and or renovation of family residential dwellings."

It cited that after a recent report about the approval of the total grant, the agency and the Commonwealth Development

Authority have reportedly been inundated with calls from many people inquiring about the funding for home ownership under the home loan program.

NMHC, a subsidiary of CDA, is being supervised by a board consisting of the same members of the CDA board, which is headed by chairman Igisomar.

The funding availability came following the approval of the CNMI's 2003 Action Plan submitted earlier by NMHC/CDA to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

HUD's Office of Community Planning and Development director Mark A. Chandler, in a recent communication, said the department believes "that the goals and objectives described in the CNMI's Action plan provide the foundation for the formulation of new partnerships, and strengthening of existing partnerships throughout the CNMI."

"These partnerships will be invaluable as the CNMI confronts the challenge of developing affordable housing and reducing homelessness," Chandler said in a letter to Gov. Juan N. Babauta.

In related developments, President Bush signed into law last year the American Dream Downpayment Act, which provides for \$200 million a year in downpayment assistance to at least 40,000 low-income families.

Earlier reports said that although the measure largely deals with housing assistance for the 50 states and the District of Columbia, it devotes a specific section for insular areas, Title V, Section 501, providing community development block grants.

The funding would be distributed to insular areas on the basis of the ratio of the population.

POLICE Brief

Driver hits pedestrian in As Lito

A 44-year-old man has been found at fault after he hit with his car one of four pedestrians walking along the road edge in As Lito Tuesday afternoon, police said yesterday.

Police department spokesperson Sgt. Tom Blas Jr. said that Chao Ren is now facing charges of failure to exercise due care, failure to yield to pedestrian right of way, and failure to maintain vehicle in its travel proportion.

Police investigators said that authorities received a call around 12:36pm Tuesday of an auto-pedestrian crash that occurred in As Lito road by the LPG gas intersection area. Medics and traffic officers were immediately dispatched to the scene.

Investigation showed that Ren, who was aboard a 2002 Toyota Tacoma with license plate ABX-605, was traveling south on As Lito Road. As he approached the intersection area, Ren saw four pedestrians walking along the road edge.

The vehicle slowed down in an attempt to avoid the pedestrians but he still hit 23-year-old Wei Zhang. The victim was immediately taken to the Commonwealth Health Center for treatment. Zhang sustained bruises in parts of his body and complained of pain on the left side of his chest.

After the investigation, law enforcers cited Ren for being at fault in the crash and lodged appropriate charges against him. (Edith G. Alejandro)

DPS clarifies vehicle fire incident in Susupe

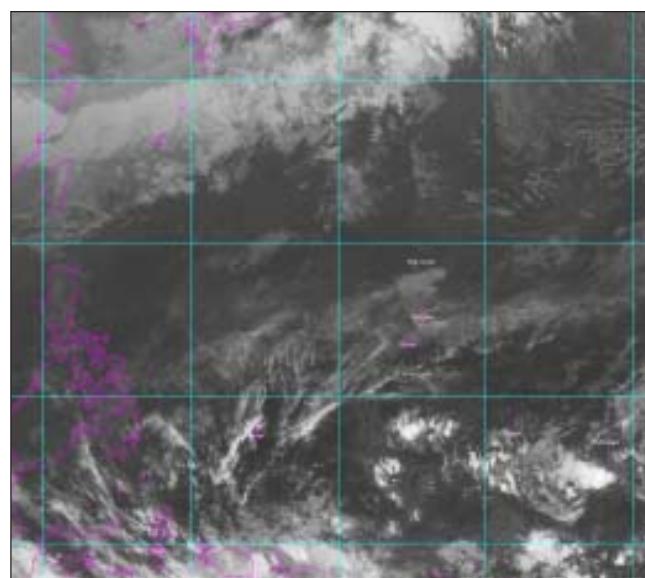
The Department of Public Safety clarified yesterday that driver of the 1991 Ford Explorer that caught fire in Susupe was not arrested, contrary to earlier reports.

DPS spokesperson Sgt. Tom Blas Jr. said Teresita Piamonte, 40, was the victim in the incident and the police report, which had described her as an arrestee, was a typographical error.

"It was a small mistake. Ms. Piamonte was not arrested. She was the victim in the incident," said Blas.

Earlier, the DPS reported that authorities arrested Piamonte after the incident. (Edith G. Alejandro)

WEATHER FORECAST



PICTURE TIME: 1:00 A.M., JANUARY 29, 2004
Western North Pacific between Equator and 25N from 130E to 180.

A near-equatorial trough extends from 5n135e to 3n145e to eq150e. trade wind convergence north of the trough is producing scattered showers south of Palau between 2n and 5n from 132e to 142e... southwest of Chuuk between 2n and 7n from 142e to 150e... and South of Pohnpei between the equator and 5n from 154e to 160e. Isolated thunderstorms are occurring between the equator and 3n from 155e to 160e. Further east... strong trade winds converging into lighter winds near the equator are generating scattered showers within 150 miles of a line from 1n160e to 4n170e to 6n178e.



SAIPAN AND TINIAN

Partly cloudy with scattered showers.
Winds: East at 10-15 mph. Highs near 86. Lows near 75.



GUAM AND ROTA

Partly cloudy & breezy isolated showers.
Winds: Northeast at 15-25 mph. Highs near 86. Low near 75.



PALAU

Mostly cloudy with isolated showers.
Winds: Northeast at 15-20 kt.



POHNPEI

Partly cloudy with isolated showers.
Winds: Northeast at 15-20 kt.



YAP AND ULITHI

Partly cloudy with isolated showers.
Winds: Northeast at 15 kt.



KOSRAE

Mostly cloudy with isolated showers.
Winds: Northeast at 15 kt.



CHUUK

Partly cloudy with isolated showers.
Winds: Northeast at 15-20 kt.



MAJURO

Mostly cloudy with isolated showers.
Winds: Northeast at 15-20 kt.

CITY	FORECAST	HIGH	LOW
Auckland	Thunder	75F (24C)	64F (18C)
Beijing	Sunny	31F (-1C)	10F (-12C)
Hong Kong	Partly Cloudy	72F (22C)	59F (15C)
Honolulu	Partly Cloudy	83F (28C)	69F (21C)
London, England	Rain	57F (14C)	50F (10C)
Los Angeles	Cloudy	59F (15C)	44F (7C)
Manila	Sunny	89F (32C)	69F (21C)
Melbourne	Cloudy	61F (16C)	42F (6C)
Miami	Partly Cloudy	81F (27C)	66F (19C)
New York City	Icy	40F (4C)	32F (0C)
Osaka	Rain	53F (12C)	25F (-4C)
Paris	Partly Cloudy	55F (13C)	46F (8C)
Pusan	Partly Cloudy	47F (8C)	23F (-5C)
Rome	Sunny	61F (16C)	49F (9C)
Salem, Oregon	Cloudy	47F (8C)	36F (2C)
San Francisco	Partly Cloudy	55F (13C)	45F (7C)
Seoul	Partly Cloudy	32F (0C)	8F (-13C)
Tokyo, Japan	Rain	55F (13C)	45F (7C)
Washington, DC	Icy	40F (4C)	35F (2C)

Alleged police officer flees crash scene

The Department of Public Safety is now investigating a reported car collision in Chalan Piao Sunday, where one of the persons involved in the accident first claimed to be police officer, and then later fled the scene of the accident.

DPS spokesperson Sgt. Tom Blas Jr. said victim Atiqur Rahman, 34, told police investigators that he was traveling west from the As Perdido area when a vehicle

suddenly exited from the William S. Reyes Elementary School intersection.

The suspect, who was driving a Toyota Echo, failed to yield at the stop sign, resulting in a collision with Rahman's car. After the collision, the vehicle pulled over and a man stepped out of the car.

According to Rahman, the suspect approached him and identified himself as a police officer. The suspect asked the

victim for his driver's license, which the victim handed over to the suspect. The suspect then took the victim's cellular phone and fled the scene aboard his car, together with another male suspect. The victim stayed on the scene until responding police officers arrived.

Blas said the police department received a call for assistance around 11:13pm about a collision by the

intersection of the Pacific World Enterprises in Chalan Piao. Authorities also sent medics to the area due to injuries that were reportedly sustained by the victim.

The suspect, who was described as wearing a white shirt and dark colored shorts with short hair and heavy build, was gone by the time the police officers arrived. Investigation is ongoing. (Edith G. Alejandro)

Policeman facing rape, 11 other charges

By JOHN RAVEL
REPORTER

The Attorney General's Office yesterday filed 12 criminal charges against a policeman who allegedly raped a woman, attacked an officer, damaged a police vehicle and even the detention facility on Tinian where he was taken for custody.

Thirty-nine-year-old Peter Borja Cepeda also allegedly drove a police vehicle for purposes other than official government business. The AGO also accused him of driving the vehicle and brandishing a gun while intoxicated.

CNMI chief prosecutor David Hutton yesterday filed the charges at the Superior Court, which included sexual assault in the second degree. The suspect allegedly raped a woman on Tinian last Dec. 26. Hutton also lodged assault and battery and disturbing the peace charges against Cepeda.

As responding officers were about to arrest Cepeda last Dec. 26, the defendant allegedly attacked an officer, Sgt. Julian Manglona. Besides charging Cepeda with another assault and battery count, the chief prosecutor also slapped the defendant with resisting arrest and obstructing justice charges.

Hutton also charged Cepeda with illegal carrying of a firearm and carrying a gun while he was drunk. The defendant is also facing criminal mischief and misuse of a government vehicle charges for damaging the fender of a police vehicle and using the patrol car.

The prosecutor also charged him with reckless driving and driving under the influence of alcohol. Hutton refused to comment when asked if Cepeda commandeered the vehicle from the responding policemen.

While at the Tinian detention center, Cepeda allegedly damaged three cell doors, prompting the AGO to additionally charge him with another criminal mischief count.

Cepeda had posted bail in the amount of \$5,000. The court summoned him to appear before it on Friday next week in connection with the criminal charges.

cars unlimited

nikko

movie station

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Gore's Game

There goes Al Gore again. Remaking himself. Remaking the Democratic Party. Remaking America. Or so he says.

The former Democratic nominee for president shook up the 2004 Democratic presidential race by endorsing Howard Dean for the nomination. Gore's blessing gives the former Vermont governor, who has been running as an insurgent, the patina of support from the party establishment. And it solidifies Dean's position as the front-runner for the nomination, as unlikely as that may seem.

Does that mean the race is over? Not so fast! Not when there hasn't been a vote cast yet. There's too much about Dean that isn't known. And it is ridiculously presumptive of the media, us included, to award the nomination before any real Democratic voters have been heard from. Let's wait for Iowa, New Hampshire and then all the big states to weigh in.

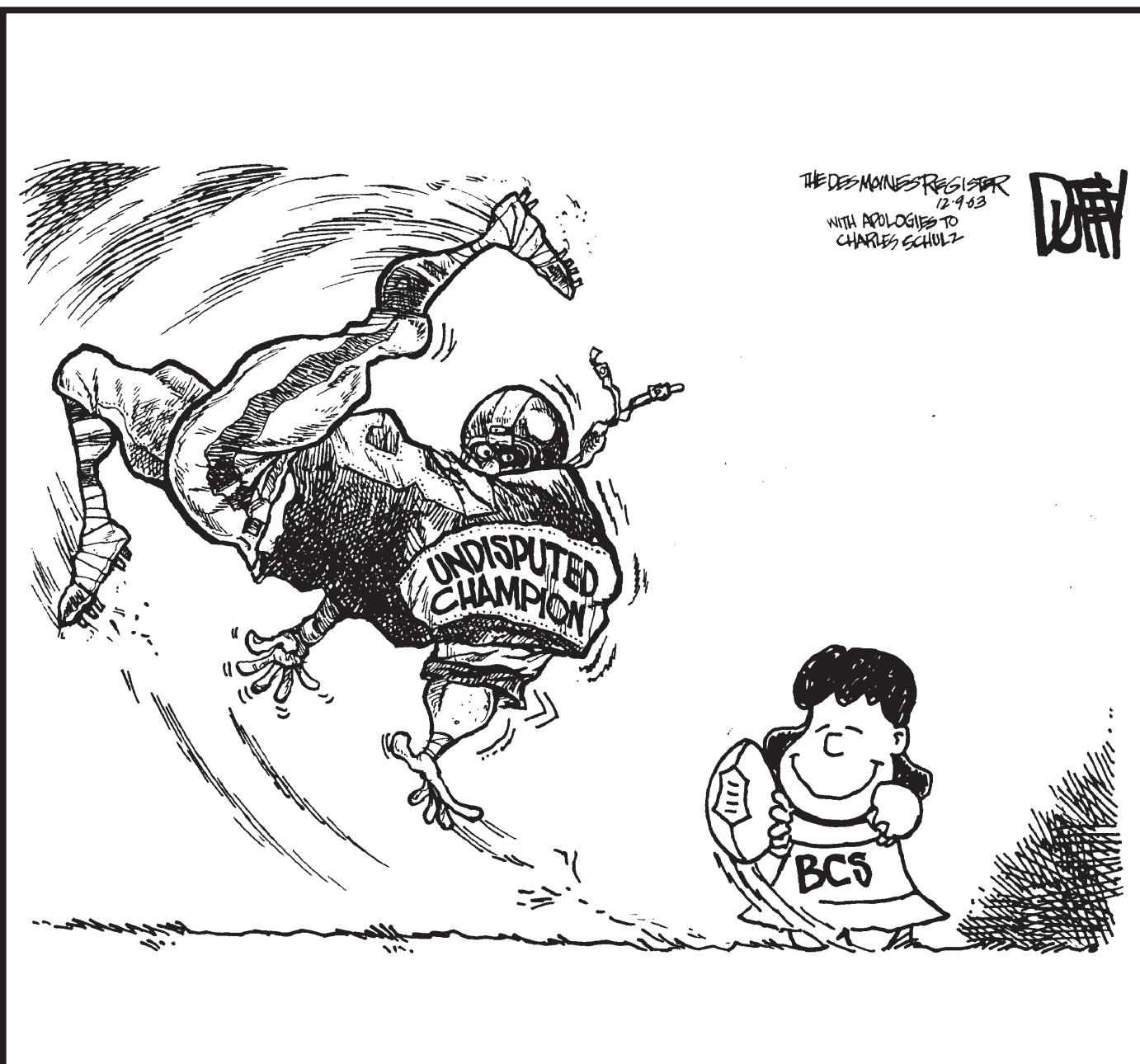
Still, Gore's announcement in the city yesterday was a stunner. Insiders say Gore, who models himself a futurist, was taken with Dean's New Age campaign, especially his use of the Internet to connect with young voters. And Gore, the former vice president, agreed with Dean's early opposition to the war in Iraq.

But while Gore's endorsement will help Dean's candidacy gain a certain credibility, Gore is a somewhat tarnished figure who has grown smaller since he lost the contested election to George W. Bush in 2000. One of the things that hurt Gore the most was the sense that he was constantly "remaking" himself, changing from blue suits to brown, from new Democrat to old. There was a sense of ungenuineness about Gore, which was not necessarily fair but still hurt him politically. Now he's saying the party has to "remake" itself.

What's his game? Some people were upset that Gore didn't even bother to notify his 2000 running mate, Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, that he was endorsing Dean. It's legitimate to ask how Gore could have chosen Lieberman to be the man to run the nation if anything happened to him and now bypass Lieberman for a man with no Washington experience.

Maybe Gore wants to pick up the New Age voting base that Dean has attracted and use it himself for a run in 2008 if Bush is re-elected. Remake or no, it's still all about politics.

Newsday



Nothing beats a direct flight

For Filipinos—and other members of the community who travel between the Northern Marianas and the Philippines, Continental Airlines' decision to start serving the Saipan-Manila route again is a welcome development. It practically shortens the flying time, thus, making it a stress-free process.

Majority of us have our own personal encounters with a layover—either on Guam or in Seoul, South Korea. And more often than not, it is more straining than fun, no matter how big the airport is or how good the shops are, and how short the layover time is.

I have personal encounters with a layover that is longer than the actual trip itself. I still unfortunately remember strolling around the Guam International Airport for 10 grueling hours when I was once sent to Palau for an assignment. I was literally trapped inside the Guam airport because I didn't have a U.S. visa then to allow me entry into the island-territory.

Just this year, I had to wait 12 backbreaking hours inside South Korea's Incheon International Airport when I attended—together with journalists from all over Asia—a roundtable discussion on migration issues in Bangkok, Thailand.

My Palau and Thailand trips are not what you would say a regular destination among most of us, especially Filipino nonresident workers in the CNMI who mostly touch base once every year. But this year's suspension of the Transit Without Visa program forced a big number of us away from the usual Saipan-Guam-Manila flights offered by Continental Airlines into Asiana Airlines' Saipan-Incheon-Manila service, or Northwest Airlines' Saipan-Japan-Manila route.

There's nothing wrong with stopping over Incheon or Narita on our way to the Philippines but there are also some factors to consider. It's still cheap to take Asiana's Saipan-Incheon-Manila flight but the route practically lengthens the traveling time: 2 hours advance check-in plus 3.5 hours flying time from Saipan to South Korea plus 2 hours layover in Incheon plus about 3 hours flying time from Seoul to Manila equals about 10 exhausting hours of traveling.

Yet still, many travelers put more weight on the extra money they would save by sacrificing a little time strolling around South Korea's gorgeous Incheon airport, with all the fascinating retail shops

By ALDWIN R. FAJARDO

The views expressed are strictly that of the author. Fajardo is the editor of the Saipan Tribune.



and food establishments sprawling inside it.

Northwest also offers a very tempting package for Manila-bound travelers but it doesn't seem to suit most Filipino workers' travel desires due to strict visa requirements implemented by the Japanese government. Still, a possible visit to the Tokyo Disneyland is still a major thing to consider.

A direct service between Saipan and Manila is the best solution to Philippine-bound passengers' traveling dilemma. Bottom line is, nothing beats a direct service, especially if the destination is only about three hours away from the point of origin.

We are now in the process of reviewing the accomplishments of those who have made it to the final list of nominees for the annual Saipan Tribune Person of the Year. The Tribune gives this award each year—now on its fifth year—to recognize the efforts and commitment of those who untiringly and consistently do their part in making the CNMI a better place to live in.

Like last year, we will be naming one Person of the Year for 2003 and nine honorable mentions. Nominees are judged based on the impacts of their contributions or efforts on the lives or overall well-being of the people or the community they intended to serve.

Among those who have been recognized in the last five years were: HIV/AIDS educator Moses Saburo (1999); Ports Authority executive director Carlos Salas and then-board chairman Roman S. Palacios, and then-House Speaker Ben Fitial (2000); David Borja, former principal of Hopwood Junior High School (2001); and Rota Mayor Benjamin T. Manglona for 2002.

Who will it be this year?

The adult GPA

Whether it's the Commonwealth seeking to float \$40 million in bonds, or your brother in law trying to finance a car, it seems like every entity and living being on the planet has got a credit rating and credit score appended to their name.

Oh, yuck, credit scores. Does anyone really want to hear about those?

Well, the good citizens of the Commonwealth should, given that the ghost of the Union Bank of California may be haunting your financial records. UBOC is long gone from our shores, but if you held a UBOC credit card, you may have been subjected to a little surprise. At issue is the fact that UBOC actually transferred some or all (I've been told it was all) of its credit card business to another company.

The transfer actually pre-dated UBOC's exodus from our fair shores, and the two events were entirely unrelated.

If you ever dealt with UBOC, you'll recall that they were a prime bank, a quality outfit. UBOC, is a corporate cousin of the Bank of Tokyo Mitsubishi, and the Japanese focus on excellent customer service was certainly a hallmark of UBOC's operations. First Hawaiian Bank, as you know, picked up UBOC's action here and retained many of the excellent staffers, which was good news for the community.

On the less happy end of things, when UBOC slipped its credit card business to another company, things didn't end so well. You have to be very careful who you deal with in the credit card industry, since not all companies are honorable.

As for any former UBOC customers, then, you should review your records carefully. If you have a credit card that has "Union Bank of California" stamped on the front, it may not really be issued by UBOC. Yikes! If you find some unknown company lurking in the background on that one, I'd advise closing the account immediately and taking your business to another place. This is a "consumer alert" from me, and I'll be happy to compile reader feedback on this note, so feel free to e-mail me any experience you may have had along these lines. I have uncovered some disturbing information on the topic and my interest is piqued, big time.

Since I'm on the credit topic, I'll mention that American Express, as well as at least one credit reporting agency, is selling a credit monitoring service. These guys eyeball your credit activity on a daily basis, in order to prevent identity theft or other monkey business from messing with your records. I paid 99 buckaroos to enroll in the service for one year. Cheapskate that I am, I think it's worth dropping a C-note on the deal.

Credit records have become the Grade Point Average of adult life. It's worth keeping an eye on your files.

Meanwhile, I'm gathering the writing files for next year; we've got a lot of ground to cover. The Commonwealth economy will be the hot topic, of course. And—drum roll—yours truly is preparing to launch a new business that you'll be hearing about, which is why I've been in meetings with attorneys this week and have not answered anyone's calls or e-mails. So much for goofing off during the holidays. In fact, I get so worn out planning for 2004 already that I'm wishing that 2003 would last a couple of months longer. I guess that Santa can't deliver more time to even the best of boys and girls.



By ED STEPHENS
Ed Stephens, Jr. is an economist and columnist for the Saipan Tribune.
"Ed4Saipan@yahoo.com"

Some soulful memories in papa's bag

You had to take off your shoes. No shoes on the gym floor. No sneakers, either. Not if you were going to do the James Brown during a pep rally at my high school. And during those years, from 1966 to 1968, whenever the band broke into, say, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," you were going to do the James Brown.

You had to.

If Martin Luther King Jr. was telling us to stride toward freedom, Brown was showing us how to glide toward it. And of course, we all wanted to arrive in style.

Unlike the twist or the funky chicken, the James Brown required both frenzy and precision—qualities that represented the tensions of our times as we moved from the regimented life of Old South segregation (my school was Booker T. Washington High in Shreveport, La.) toward a world where you could finally say it loud, "I'm Black and I'm Proud!"

The Kennedy Center Honors that Brown received Sunday brought back those memories.

"We honor one of the most influential musicians of the last 50 years," Kennedy Center Chairman James A. Johnson said of Brown. That would put the onset of Brown's influence pretty close to the start of my life.

Last year, I read a profile of Brown in the New Yorker magazine that led me to the conclusion that given Soul Brother No. 1's troubles with the drug PCP and the police, his struggles with past wives, mistresses, girlfriends and others, along with the fallout from some peculiar political stands, he was lucky to be alive.

"Race, poverty and exclusion were the defining features of James Brown's childhood world, and he might easily have seen himself as cursed," Philip Gourevitch wrote in the New Yorker. "Instead, he seems to have understood himself to be a free agent—denied the comforts of a conventional home, but also spared its constraints—with no choice but to fight for emancipation however he could."

Did that explain Brown's weird behavior—or how he survived in spite of it? Did too much adulation and exaltation lead him to believe that he could do no wrong? A Look magazine article in 1969 declared: "James Brown is a new important leader. His constituency dwarfs Stokley Carmichael's and the late Dr. Martin Luther King's." Did such twisted statements go to his head?

All I know is that during adolescence, I'd break out in a cold

"With each repetition, he invested the monosyllable with a different emotional accent and stress—prayer and pride, impatience and invitation—and although there was ache in his voice, he did not sound like a man pleading so much as commanding what was rightfully his."

back at the start—on a recording that lasts less than three minutes.

Gourevitch dissected Brown's performance: "With each repetition, he invested the monosyllable with a different emotional accent and stress—prayer and pride, impatience and invitation—and although there was ache in his voice, he did not sound like a man pleading so much as commanding what was rightfully his."

This was not a song for doing the James Brown. Our band couldn't play it, and nobody but Brown could sing it. You couldn't whistle or hum it, either. You could, however, put it on a record player to convey your desire for that special someone to stay just a little longer.

Oh, yes. Good God almighty. Honey, please. Don't. Ohhh. Oh, yeah. Lord. I love you so. Pleeeeeeeease. Don't go. Pleeee-ee-ee-ease. Don't go. Honey, please don't go. Oh. I love you so. Please. Please.

Singer Bonnie Raitt was quoted in the Kennedy Center Honors program as saying about Brown, "You couldn't even list how many people have been influenced by him."

If only she knew how true that was.



By COURTLAND MILLOY
The Washington Post

sweat right along with the Godfather of Soul. I never knew why papa needed a brand-new bag, unless it had wine in it; but I knew what to say when I got something new: "I feel good!" or "I got the feeling!"

And the only way to express that feeling was to do the James Brown—to glide on one leg, if you could, with head bobbing and fists pumping, then spin, jump and fall into a 180-degree split, then snap back up—unhurt—and resume your glide.

I also knew how it felt not to get anything at all, especially from a girl. Again, Brown provided words and rhythm suitable to the occasion in what must be the best begging song of all time by a male vocalist, "Please, Please, Please."

I counted the word "please" 25 times—seven times back-to-

Foreign currencies and CNMI's economy

How do changes in value of foreign currencies affect the CNMI's economy?

International currencies, which are free floating, trade like commodities in the international financial markets and their values are determined on buying and selling volumes. However, some countries keep the value of their currencies fixed and only change as they deem necessary or due to international pressure. Examples of free floating currencies are Japanese yen and American dollar while Chinese yuan is fixed in value. Exchange rates are expressed as value of one country's currency in terms of another country's currency. For example, current price or value of Japanese Yen in terms of U.S. dollar is around 110 yen per dollar, similar to how we express the price of a commodity, such as 2 pounds of bananas per dollar.

When the value of a given country's currency rises its products become expensive to other countries to buy and vice versa. For example, U.S. dollar value against yen has decreased from about 120 to 110 yen in about a year. It means that the prices of the Japanese

"It would be in the best interest of Filipino workers to keep their savings in dollars and send home only enough to meet the needs of their families. Unlike Filipino workers Chinese workers don't have incentive to keep their saving here because the value of their currency is fixed by the government."

products for us have increased and the prices of our products to Japanese have decreased. In our case, the CNMI's products and services are cheaper to Japanese visitors because the fall in the value of dollar in terms of yen has increased their buying power. This is also a very favorable factor to get more visitors or the visitors who come here to spend more. On the other hand for the Japanese investors who have to send back their investment returns to their parent companies, this factor is unfavorable because it has reduced the yen value of their returns. It has also reduced the yen value of salaries of Japanese business managers who work here.

Now, looking at the Philippines' case whose currency has been consistently falling against the dollar, this has an opposite effect to

By DR. MOHAMMAD ASHRAF



that of Japan. As soon as the Philippine peso falls, it implies an automatic rise in the wages of Filipino workers in the CNMI because they get paid in dollars. In this case it would be in the best interest of Filipino workers to keep their savings in dollars and send home only enough to meet the needs of their families. Unlike Filipino workers, Chinese workers don't have incentive to keep their savings here because the value of their currency is fixed by the government.

As you may have noticed in the national news media the matter of fixed value of Chinese Yuan (RMB) is under serious debate between the U.S. and China. The U.S. government thinks the Chinese are keeping the value of their currency artificially low, which makes U.S. products expensive in China and Chinese products cheaper in the U.S. The logic behind this argument is there is over a \$100 billion trade deficit between the U.S. and China. The United States is asking China to set higher rate of its currency or expect retaliatory actions.

In conclusion, I would say our government has no influence whatsoever on the value of any currency and we have to learn to live with the consequences of changing values of currencies particularly in our region. I may also add the news reporting of currency rates would be a valuable service to businesses and workers alike.

Saipan Tribune

CNMI'S FIRST DAILY NEWSPAPER

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High Court to tackle three appeals on Tinian

The CNMI Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in three appeals at the Tinian Courthouse on Tinian today.

Before this, however, High Court justices will continue their "Judges in the Classroom" series—an educational outreach program where members of the judiciary speak to students about a variety of legal topics in an effort to encourage students to

study and become good citizens.

Justice Alejandro C. Castro and law clerk Tomas T. Suros will address students at the Tinian High School at 8am, while Justice John A. Manglona and his law clerk, Michael L. Ernest, will address students at Grace Christian Academy at the same time.

At 10am, the Court will hear the appeal of Santos v. STS, et al., Appeal No. 03-0006-GA.

This appeal involves a jury trial injury action resulting from an automobile accident. The issues include whether the trial court erred when it admitted certain evidence, whether the trial court erred when it allowed the jury to consider punitive damages, and whether the punitive damages awarded were excessive.

At 11am, the Court will hear the appeal of CNMI v. Nestor

Taitano, Appeal No. 01-0017-GA. This case is an appeal from a conviction and sentence for involuntary manslaughter and illegal use of a firearm in the commission of involuntary manslaughter after trial by jury and a conviction for assault and battery by the trial judge. Appellant claims the evidence presented is insufficient to support his convictions, that the

admission of hearsay evidence is improper and prejudicial, that the prosecution improperly admitted former convictions, that prosecutorial misconduct improperly shifted the burden of proof, that the court's failure to record all sidebar was prejudicial, and that the cumulative effect of errors at trial prejudiced the appellant so that a new trial is required.

At 2pm, the Court will hear the appeal of CNMI v. Esteven King, Jr., et al., Appeal No. 0009-GA. This case is an appeal of a conviction and sentence for bribery. Appellant claims the evidence presented is insufficient to support a conviction for bribery, and that his conviction violates due process and equal protection under the U.S. and CNMI Constitutions.

SIA

From Page 1

accorded to the CPA's airport division.

The Saipan International Airport had been given a negative BBB in investment grade rating by the Fitch rating agency—the second time in the last two years.

"We are going to meet with the bondholders in efforts to mitigate the shortfall for three straight years and to allow us to meet the 1.25 bond ratio obligation we have for the airport division," the executive director added.

He explained that unless the CPA airport division meets its bond ratio, the Saipan International Airport would remain on the watch list and would not be removed from it until positive efforts help generate more funds for the airport section is realized.

"We have to bring the CPA to compliance and to convince the rating agency that we have a workable plan that would remove us from the credit watch," he said.

If the CPA continues to post a shortfall in revenue and fails to meet its bond obligation, it would not be in compliance with its bond stipulation, which may affect its existing bond programs that are already on the brink of default.

Salas is optimistic, though, that the Saipan International Airport would generate additional funds in 2004, as passenger traffic continues to post positive growth since the beginning of this fiscal year.

Also, the CPA is working with an independent financial consultant to perform a feasibility study on the CPA's revenue stream, expenses, and rate structuring to ward off other negative impacts to its

revenue generating capacity.

Last year, the Fitch Ratings placed the BBB rating of the CPA airport revenue bond to Rating Watch Negative.

Ratings are placed on Rating Watch to notify investors that there is a reasonable probability of a rating change and the likely direction of such change. Rating Watch is typically resolved over a relatively short period of time.

The CPA has approximately \$20 million of airport revenue bonds outstanding.

The placement of the authority's bonds on Rating Watch reflects the decrease in enplanement activity following the events of Sept. 11, the subsequent weakness in international economic activity, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, the war in Iraq and the implications for the authority's financial operations.

Salas said the low enplanement activity prompted

the negative warning since this directly means lower revenue, which could jeopardize CPA's capacity to pay off all of its expenses, including the bond payments.

"The FY 2002 was the worst year ever for everyone due to the effects of Sept. 11, the Iraq war and now SARS. To top it all, the Asian economy is still soft and has yet to rebound. In FY 2003—in the first five months—our arrivals increased by over 60,000 visitors but, unfortunately, the war in Iraq and SARS dampened that growth," he explained.

He added that many airports, municipalities and even governments like Guam are having their bonds downgraded, with credit alerts being issued to warn investors of the risks these bonds are exposed to.

The CPA owns and operates three airports in the Commonwealth, the largest of which is the Saipan International Airport.

GOVT

From Page 1

arrears, Williams said his office received \$775,000 on Wednesday.

The government, he said, has always failed to pay its minimum monthly payment of \$800,000 on time.

In his report, Williams decried Finance's seeming "disregard" for CUC's requests. "It appears that Finance may not be taking CUC seriously when we ask for a payment each month. They disregard our requests for payment to be made before the 15th of each month," he said.

He disclosed that due to the government's failure to pay on time, CUC had to cash a certificate of deposit worth over \$1 million to meet its obligation to Mobil Marianas for fuel supply.

"Because the government is behind...CUC had to cash a CD...in order to make the Mobil payment in January," said Williams.

In the meantime, he said, he and CUC executive director Lorraine Babauta will continue to follow up regularly on the government's payments.

The CUC last year had also threatened to cut its services to the central government, reaching the point where it issued delinquency notices to various offices. In the end, it remained a threat. Not a single government office was ever disconnected.

OFF-ISLAND

From Page 1

conference that she and board member Rufina Miles would be attending.

She did not provide details, but she was quick to note that "there is no discrimination against Tinian" as other people may perceive.

"This is not just Rota. Tinian can attend if they have the budget. Anybody is free to come if your division has the budget. Let's not say that there is discrimination against some islands here," she said.

Sources claimed that those included in the travel list are Manglona, who represents Rota on the board; her son Benjamin, who works for CUC-Rota; and her nephew Charles Manglona, CUC-Rota resident director.

Miles, who represents the Carolinian community, was reportedly being persuaded by Manglona to come along. It was not confirmed if she will join the team.

Vice chairman Frank Guerrero initially wanted to go but he allegedly pulled out.

As for Tinian's participation, Tinian resident director Greg Castro indicated lack of awareness about the trip.

Tinian board member Allen Perez also seemed unaware, but his seatmate, Manglona, pointed out to him that she had handed him a travel package but that he declined to be included. Perez then said that he decided not to join the trip as "it's for management."

Perez, however, may be referring to another conference, which will be held in Hawaii to be sponsored by the Department of the Interior.

CPA

From Page 1

passengers pay in different airports abroad. The same charge is being collected in the Philippines and Palau, which collect \$10 and \$20 respectively.

But Salas said all U.S. airports are allowed up to \$4.50 only in the Passenger Facility Fee that it can collect from passengers.

"Majority of U.S. airports are doing this. Passengers do not shell out cash; the amount is included in their airline tickets as the terminal tax," explained the executive director.

According to Salas, the plan would soon be proposed to the

During the meeting, CUC deputy executive director Bernard Villagomez said the Hawaii conference deals with wastewater and is part of a regional grant that was submitted by American Samoa. He said that American Samoa informed CUC that it has two travel slots for CUC.

Meantime, board member Velma Palacios pointed out that workshops or conferences should be attended by individuals who are directly involved in the work.

"Let's make sure that the corporation benefits from all these travels, workshops and conferences. Send the people who will be learning from it and share what they've learned back with the corporation, she said.

To that, Manglona reasoned that the CUC could not just send anybody to off-island conferences such as a utility man, a grass cutter, and the like.

This developed as sources claimed that CUC board chairman Herman P. Sablan issued last week a freeze on travel among CUC board members. The order, however, was rescinded yesterday, sources said.

Meantime, Manglona, who

was earlier asked by the Office of the Public Auditor to return some \$2,000 in "overpayment"

from her previous travels, said that she has been paying the amount in installments.

"It's being settled. That issue has been addressed," she said.

She noted, though, that she still wants the Attorney General's Office to review the matter. She earlier refused to pay the amount pending consultation with authorities.

FAA and later to all airline companies serving the Northern Marianas for proper consultation and implementation.

He said the Passenger Facility Fee would bring the Saipan International Airport into compliance with its debt service obligations and the 1.25 bond ratio, particularly since the SIA have been recording revenue shortfalls in the last two years.

In 2002, the Saipan International Airport recorded a \$2.5-million deficit; in 2003, this dropped to \$500,000.

By implementing the collection, the CPA is upbeat that the Saipan International Airport would soon meet its bond obligations.

maganda
utang

Palacios seeks to expedite scholarship board creation

By MARIAN A. MARAYA
REPORTER

With the enactment of the Saipan Higher Educational Assistance Act, its main proponent, House Rep. Arnold I. Palacios, estimates a period between six to nine months to get the scholarship program up and running.

Saipan Local Law 13-21, signed by Gov. Juan N. Babauta this week, establishes the Saipan and Northern Islands Municipal Scholarship Board.

Palacios said the Saipan and Northern Islands Legislative Delegation is communicating with the Office of the Saipan Mayor to expedite the submission of nominees who will eventually comprise the board membership.

The legislator has volunteered his personal time to see to it that the scholarship program is implemented in time for the next fall semester, at the latest.

"I have talked to a lot of very interested individuals willing to help—local attorneys, businessmen and women, [and] retired professionals. They have high hopes for this program," Palacios said yesterday.

Babauta, in signing House Local Bill 13-48 into law,

MVA and GVB to promote NMI at RP Travel Tour Expo

The Marianas Visitors Authority is gearing up for the 11th TravelTour Expo slated for Feb. 6-8, 2004 in Mandaluyong City, Philippines. The expo is organized by the Philippine Travel Agencies Association, the largest travel association in the country.

Deemed to be the largest and most prestigious travel trade show in the Philippines, the event was organized to encourage unity in the travel industry and to promote the interests of its members and the traveling public.

The MVA, in partnership with the Guam Visitors Bureau, will be sharing booth space at this year's expo, where they will showcase the attractiveness of the CNMI and Guam to business and leisure travelers. The MVA delegation includes Directors JM Guerrero and Edward Maratita, Public relations & Community programs Manager Martin Duenas, and Marketing assistant Brenda Repeki.

"Our participation at this expo is necessary to further boost travel and tourism from this market, especially now that we have the airline service coming in directly from Manila. It is important that MVA begins to develop this market and also tap into it. The MVA and the GVB is working together to promote the Marianas and see the potential from the Philippine market," says Jonas Ogren, MVA managing director.

recommended that SNILD amend the bill to allow for the appointment of members with staggered terms in order to ensure better continuity of the scholarship program.

In response, Palacios assured that the SNILD is amenable to this. "It's not a problem. That was an oversight on our part," the minority representative admitted. He

added that the SNILD will soon be drafting the amendment to this effect.

The lawmaker said the toughest part of the process is coming out with the rules and regulations on how to run the scholarship program. He, from a separate local law, SLL

13-8, which generates funds through poker and pachinko machine license fees.

Palacios stressed that this is not the sole source of funds being looked at, citing other avenues that may be tapped to fuel the scholarship fund.

"We can look at different endowments and foundations, even the federal government. We

could set up a loan with the MPLT. There are a lot of opportunities out there once the board gets organized," the congressman explained.

The new law establishes the scholarship board within the Office of the Saipan Mayor, whose task is to appoint five members subject to the advice and consent of the SNILD.



Palacios

microl spin
+red

guangdong

gorman

Fitial receives distinguished graduate award from MCS

After nearly 40 years, House Speaker Benigno R. Fitial experienced a second graduation at Mount Carmel School.

After receiving Mt. Carmel's "Distinguished Graduate Award" last Friday, Fitial, speaking of this year's Catholic Schools Week theme in relation to his campaign platform, said: "Now that I have been honored with Mount Carmel's "Distinguished Graduate Award", I feel that I've really graduated! In other words, I went from the Four Es, to the Three Fs. Those Three Fs being Faith-Filled Future—the theme of this year's Catholic Schools Week."

In his acceptance speech, the Speaker went on to extol the virtues of his Christian faith, stating that "faith is the foundation of our existence as Catholics...the cornerstone of our belief as Christians and children of God."

Without faith, Fitial said: "We are lost. Faith alone sustains us. It nourishes us in our daily lives. It compels us to do what is



Fitial

right and avoid what is wrong...it is the basis of our answered prayers."

The Speaker affirmed the tradition of a Catholic, faith-based education, believing that it instills good character among students, which, he maintained, was one of the main purposes behind education.

"We want young people to be molded, shaped, and cultivated by their education," he said. "We want them to live morally—to have the right values and beliefs...to have integrity, to be

honest, dependable, reliable, just, and trustworthy."

According to Mount Carmel School president Margaret C. Dela Cruz, school officials selected Fitial as its "Distinguished Graduate" this year, in part, because of his "impact in the community ...as a product of Mount Carmel School."

Each year, since 1998, Mount Carmel School celebrates Catholic Schools Week, a nationwide celebration of Catholic education sponsored by the National Catholic Education Association.

Fitial received his "Distinguished Graduate Award" at the culmination of this year's Catholic Schools Week celebrations, which took place during Mount Carmel's Family Night celebration, where more than 1,000 local Catholics enjoyed a family fiesta dinner last Friday.

Fitial, a Mount Carmel graduate of 1964, sends his own children to the Catholic school and said he was very honored to receive the award.

Designs sought for 23rd Flame Tree Arts Festival

The Commonwealth Council for Arts and Culture will be holding the 23rd Annual Flame Tree Arts Festival on April 16-18, 2004 at the American Memorial Park—west of the Bell Tower.

The Council is soliciting designs for this year's poster design. The design should be submitted to the CCAC office in the form of full color "rough" drafts, by Friday, February 13, 2004 no later than 4:30pm. These may be any size, however, they must be to the scale of 17 inches by 22 inches in a vertical

format. The poster will be printed in and design must be submitted in full color. All two dimensional media is acceptable.

One design will be selected and the respective artist will need to complete a finished product by Wednesday, February 18, 2004. A Stipend of \$300.00 will be paid to the selected artist. The artwork will only be used for printed, informational and promotional materials for the "23rd Annual Flame Tree Arts Festival" selected design will be kept as part of the Flame Tree Festival Collection.

For more information, please contact Mr. Angel S. Hocog at the Arts Council telephone 322-9982/83.

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Business

Capricciosa, Tony Roma's open in Garapan



JOHN RAVELO

Staff and personnel of Capricciosa and Tony Roma's pose for a souvenir shot at their new location in Garapan.

By JOHN RAVELO
REPORTER

An industry leader in the restaurant business on Saipan has decided to relocate its two popular restaurants to the Garapan district on the heels of the CNMI's effort to transform the area into a plusher and more upscale tourism and commercial hub.

Capricciosa, which offers Italian cuisine, and Tony Roma's, best known for its ribs, officially open at their new location today in the Garapan district, bringing the best that the two restaurants have to offer that much closer to their loyal patrons.

The new restaurants stand adjacent at the former Louis Vuitton building on Beach Road, not far across the DFS Galleria in Garapan. Businessman Robert Jones is president of WDI Saipan Inc., which operates the restaurants.

"We were in La Fiesta for seven years and we survived those challenges. We expect to be better now that we are at the center already," said Rubel Zabala, manager of Capricciosa.

Although the restaurants have relocated, Zabala said Capricciosa brings with it the quality service and Italian cuisine that it has been known for.

"This is an awesome location for us. We're expecting good numbers in business," added John Trinidad, manager of a Capricciosa branch on Guam, who came to the new Saipan outlet to train the restaurant's staff.

The new location offers the restaurants' patrons with a cozier place and more spacious bars. Capricciosa assistant supervisor Antony

Roman said the new location provides better ambiance, with designs and equipment that are practically new.

What were once special courses at the former location are now offered regularly at the new site. These include the Bruschetta, French toast bread topped with chopped tomato, Smoked Salmon Spring Rolls, Penne with Bacon and Fresh Basil in Special Tomato Cream Sauce and Spaghetti Italian Sausage and Various Bell Peppers, according to Zabala.

"Our concept remains family-style," he said, adding, however, that half-orders are available. The restaurant offers soda, iced tea, lemonade, and iced and brewed coffee at drink-all-you-can servings.

Even as the restaurants' staff was busy preparing for today's event, some patrons could not help but visit the restaurant. The management welcomed the word-of-mouth going on regarding today's grand opening. "There are already customers even if we are not open yet."

Capricciosa serves a wide array of pasta ranging from spaghetti, fettuccine, and linguine to rigatoni, penne and lasagna. These pasta favorites come in different variations of distinctive Capricciosa sauces filled with assorted condiments. A Capricciosa's favorite is the seafood spaghetti—pasta topped with a mixture of tuna, calamari and mussel in tomato sauce.

Spaghetti alone has at least 10 variations, including Whole Clams in a Delicate Broth, Carbonara that contains sautéed bacon and egg in cream sauce, Eggplant and Spinach in Meat Sauce, and Calamari and Onion in Squid-ink Sauce.

dial rent

McPhetres to discuss stateless citizenship in the Commonwealth

The Society for Human Resources Management has invited Northern Marianas College instructor Sam McPhetres to speak at the monthly SHRM meeting at the Hyatt Regency Saipan on February 19, 2004, from 11:30am to 1:15pm.

McPhetres will speak about stateless citizens—those who were born in the Northern Marianas by parents who were legal aliens between 1978 and 1986, the transition period of the Covenant agreement signed in 1978 and the conferment of Presidential Proclamation No. 5564 by President Ronald Reagan in 1986.

Randy Mendoza, a stateless

citizen himself, will also address the issue. It is estimated that the Commonwealth has approximately 300 individuals with stateless citizenship status.

Non-members in the business community—whether owners, managers or human resource professionals—are invited to learn more about the Society and improve their human resource knowledge through the presentation and discussion.

The CNMI Chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management is the Commonwealth's foremost professional forum for discussion and training in Human Resource matters.

Recognized as a Superior Merit Chapter, the CNMI branch

is composed of human resource professionals from a variety of industries, large and small, who recognize a need for a local society for professionals from a variety of industries, large and small, who recognize a need for a local society for professionals in the human resources field. The CNMI Chapter is affiliated with the national organization.

The meeting will be \$15 for SHRM members and \$20 for non-SHRM members. Lunch is included in the cost. Seating is limited; therefore members and others interested in attending this meeting should contact Kim or Gil at 234-1234 ext. 5402/5415 or send reservations via fax at 233-0182.

When leaving a job gets complicated

By KENNETH BREDEMEIER
THE WASHINGTON POST

On its face, leaving a job ought to be simple enough. You give notice, and later walk out the door. But it can be much more complicated.

Q. "I've recently finished graduate school, and had about three years of professional experience under my belt prior to grad school. But I recently resigned from a new position, with strong 'encouragement' from my supervisor to do so, after a few months on the job. Do I put this on my resume, and if yes, how do I answer questions about such short-term employment? The problem is that the work I did there is very reflective of the kind of work I want to find and really highlights my skills."

A. Karen Usher, president and chief executive of TPO Inc., a McLean, VA., human resources outsourcing firm, said she not only does not see a problem in listing the short-lived job on a resume, but thinks it wise to do so.

To omit the job, Usher said, the worker "runs the risk of raising more questions than not if it's discovered. Then it makes it look worse than what really happened.

"You don't explain on a resume what happened," she said, "but rather in an interview," and even then not in excruciating detail. "You say, 'It looked like a good fit when I got that job. It wasn't.' " "Be very professional about it," she said. "Say, 'Here's the reason we agreed to part.' Even having two of those (short-lived jobs) on your resume over a long career is not a problem. There are lots of reasons today why people

have short stints on their resumes."

Despite the conflict with the boss, Usher said this worker can offer to provide references from that job, although Usher said, "Don't provide buddies. Give a substantial reference from another manager, one involved with a project you worked on, someone with knowledge of your work."

Usher said that if a worker is asked why she is leaving a job, she can simply say, "I've got a better opportunity."

cellular pro

church of jesus

pic
+red



Pictured from left are THC executive vice president Jerry Tan, Century Tours & Travel president Dave Sablan, and Saipan Chamber of Commerce president Alex Sablan.

Saipan Chamber recognizes local travel firm

The Saipan Chamber of Commerce recognized Century Travel & Tours president David M. Sablan and Tan Holdings Corporation executive vice president Jerry Tan at the business group's general membership meeting this week for the company's efforts in helping open up the China tourism market for the Northern Marianas.

Chamber president Alex Sablan thanked THC and Century Tours and Travel for helping open the CNMI to Chinese travelers by chartering

direct China Eastern Airlines flights from Shanghai to Saipan during the recent Lunar New Year traditional holiday period.

Tan, in his remarks, said: "We've studied the China market and it offers huge potential for our islands' tourism industry. Last year there were 20 million outbound tourists from China, which even surpassed Japan, and these tourists do a lot of spending when they go abroad."

Tan added that Hong Kong and other markets that get a lot of Chinese tourists

are really benefiting from this market, "so we hope we can do it here. We are very glad we were able to bring in these Shanghai-Saipan air charters as part of our company's efforts to bring more tourists and help the local economy."

Sablan, meanwhile, recognized the company's partner in this charter project, Spring International Tours, which has 100 offices throughout China. Sablan mentioned that the company is looking at additional charters out of Shanghai later in the year.

Federal regulators approve new US futures exchange

By DAVE CARPENTER
AP BUSINESS WRITER

Federal regulators signed off Wednesday on a new all-electronic futures exchange, setting the stage for a rivalry between the German- and Swiss-backed Eurex US and the Chicago exchanges that have long dominated the lucrative U.S. futures industry.

Eurex officials issued a statement saying they were "more than delighted" with the 3-0 approval vote by the Commodity Futures Trading Commission in Washington and are on plan to launch the Chicago-headquartered exchange this Sunday.

Eurex US poses a direct threat to the Chicago Board of Trade because it offers many of the same U.S. debt products—two-year, five-year, 10-year and 30-year U.S. Treasury futures and options—and at lower costs. It also will list European interest-rate and stock futures.

Board of Trade officials said they can fend off the challenge because they offer their customers broader choices and a bigger, more efficient marketplace. Bernard Dan, president and CEO, said the 156-year-old exchange is well-positioned to thrive because of "a superior electronic trading platform, an innovative clearing solution ... and the most competitive pricing in the world."

But wary of the new competition, the Board said this week it will waive or reduce electronic trading fees on

Treasury contracts and introduce electronic trading of German government debt contracts—a key Eurex business.

The Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the largest U.S. futures exchange, also will pay a price for any success by Eurex US because it now shares a common clearing platform with the Board of Trade. That means it will lose clearing volume—the business of validating, delivering and settling transactions—if the new exchange takes market share away from the Board of Trade.

"It's the opening of a battle for survival as it relates to the Chicago exchanges," said Allan Zavarro, executive vice president and global head of futures at ABN Amro Bank in New York.

The Merc also faces another competitive challenge from Europe starting March 18 when another large futures exchange, the London-based Euronext-Liffe, begins listing a euro-dollar contract that will go head-to-head against its most popular product.

The new Chicago exchange is a bold foray into the United States market by parent company Eurex, which is the world's largest derivatives exchange and is headquartered in Frankfurt, Germany. But analysts say Eurex US—known formally as U.S. Futures Exchange LLC—could have a tough time initially in terms of getting enough volume and market share to create liquidity for its contracts, despite its lower costs.

aqua resort

Factory orders strongly rebound in December

By JEANNINE AVERSA
AP WRITER

America's factories saw orders rebound in December, rising by a strong 1.1 percent, a fresh sign that the national economy's recovery was in full stride as it headed into the new year.

The over-the-month increase reported by the Commerce Department Wednesday came after orders placed with factories

demand for "nondurable" goods, such as food products and apparel.

After keeping their inventories lean, "businesses are now having to restock everything from clothing and apparel to toothpaste, diapers and prescription and non-prescription medicines," said Mark Vitner, economist at Wachovia. That restocking, he said, bodes well for helping economic growth in the current quarter, which some analysts predict will exceed at 4 percent annual rate.

For all of 2003, orders to U.S. factories rose by 3.9 percent—the best showing since 2000, when the economy was still enjoying a record expansion—and a big improvement from the 1.9 percent decline registered in 2002.

Wednesday's report, along with other recent economic data, suggest that the nation's manufacturing sector is gaining some ground—good news for the sector's own recovery as well as for the U.S. economy's continued health.

A more forward-looking report released Monday by the Institute for Supply Management said that manufacturing activity was robust in January.

Still, job creation in the sector remains weak. Factories have lost 2.8 million jobs since July 2000, the month manufacturing employ-

ment peaked in the last expansion. The nation's manufacturers were hardest hit by the 2001 recession and have struggled since then to get back on firm footing.

But recent economic data suggest that demand at home and abroad for U.S. manufactured goods is getting stronger.

A weaker dollar and stronger demand from other countries, whose economies are improving, have been helping U.S. exports in recent months. A weaker dollar makes U.S. goods less expensive and thus more competitive on global markets.

The 1.1 percent increase in overall factory orders in December was the largest rise since October, when orders went up by 2.4 percent.

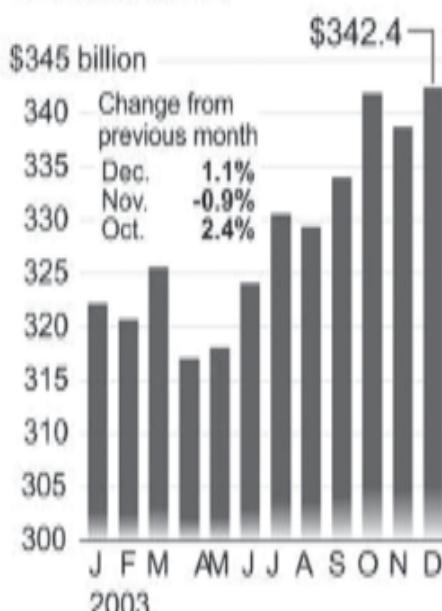
Orders for "nondurable" goods rose by 2 percent in December, on top of a 0.8 percent increase in November. Orders placed with factories for food, clothing, leather goods, petroleum and coal products, and plastics products all showed gains.

Orders for "durable" goods—costly manufactured products expected to last at least three years—rose by 0.3 percent in December, an improvement from November's 2.4 percent decline. Stronger demand for machinery and electrical equipment were among the categories posting an increase in orders, while orders for cars and furniture were among categories in which orders declined.

Excluding transportation equipment, which swings widely from month to month, all other orders to factories rose by 0.9 percent in December, a turnaround from the 1.1 percent drop seen in November.

Factory orders

Here is a look at total new orders to American factories. Seasonally adjusted



SOURCE: Department of Commerce AP

dropped by 0.9 percent in November. The latest snapshot of manufacturing activity was better than economists were expecting. They were forecasting a modest 0.3 percent rise in orders for December.

Much of the strength in December reflected stronger

recovered Monday by the Institute for Supply Management said that manufacturing activity was robust in January.

Still, job creation in the sector remains weak.

Factories have lost 2.8 million jobs since July 2000, the month manufacturing employ-

Dow ends down 34 points; Nasdaq falls 52

By MEG RICHARDS
AP BUSINESS WRITER

A tentative forecast on business spending from Cisco Systems Inc. hit the technology sector hard Wednesday, and the Nasdaq composite index plunged 2.5 percent. The selloff dragged the rest of the market downward in volatile trading.

The Nasdaq tumbled 52.07, or 2.5 percent, to 2,014.14—its biggest one-day point loss since Sept. 24, when it closed down 58.02 at 1,843.70. The tech-heavy index was at its lowest level in more than a month, but was still up 0.5 percent for the year. The Dow Jones industrial average finished down 34.44, or 0.3 percent, at 10,470.74, while the Standard & Poor's 500 index lost 9.51, or 0.8 percent, to 1,126.52.

Cautious investors moved to defensive positions, with blue chip shares showing greater strength than more speculative tech and small-cap stocks. As earnings season winds down, some analysts say the market may be headed for a pause, but despite Wednesday's tech selling, investors don't seem ready to pull out in large numbers yet.

The Nasdaq's slump on Cisco's less-than-stellar forecast underscores that "a lot of good news is priced in, and any sort of disappointment can affect prices disproportionately," said Brian Pears, head equity trader at Victory Capital Management in Cleveland.

Corporate earnings have beaten forecasts overall and economic numbers have been consistently strong. A better-

than-expected rise in factory orders for December, reported Wednesday by the Commerce Department, offered further evidence that the recovery remains on track.

Decliners outnumbered advancers by more than 3 to 1 on the New York Stock Exchange. Consolidated volume was 2.14 billion shares, compared with 1.93 billion shares traded at the same point Tuesday.

The Russell 2000 index, which tracks smaller company stocks, was down 15.12, or 2.6 percent, at 564.03.

Overseas, Japan's Nikkei stock average sank 1.8 percent Wednesday. In Europe, France's CAC-40 closed down 0.8 percent, Britain's FTSE 100 finished 0.2 percent higher and Germany's DAX index finished 0.7 percent lower.

church's



Witness says Stewart sold stock after tip

By ERIN McCLAM
AP WRITER

An "extraordinarily upset" Martha Stewart ordered all her ImClone Systems stock sold after she learned the company founder was dumping his own shares, the prosecution's star witness testified Wednesday at the homemaking mogul's trial.

Douglas Faneuil, a former assistant at Merrill Lynch & Co., said he passed along the tip to Stewart on orders from her broker Peter Bacanovic when she called on Dec. 27, 2001.

"Peter thought you might like to act on the information that Sam is selling all of his shares," Faneuil said he told Stewart, referring to ImClone founder Sam Waksal.

Faneuil said he quoted ImClone's stock price, and Stewart eventually declared: "I want to sell." Faneuil placed the sell order, netting her about \$228,000.

The Food and Drug Administration issued a negative report the next day about ImClone's experimental cancer drug, sending the stock down 18 percent. Stewart saved about \$50,000 by getting out when she did. Waksal is serving a seven-year prison sentence for securities fraud and other charges.

Faneuil, 28, described a frantic effort by Bacanovic in the months after the sale to

pressure him into supporting two separate cover stories. He said the broker offered him a week's vacation and a trip to Argentina in early 2002.

He said Bacanovic first told him the reason for the sale was to generate tax losses to offset capital-gains taxes, then claimed he and Stewart had a pre-existing agreement to sell the stock when it fell to \$60.

But Faneuil said even Stewart's financial assistant questioned the tax-loss justification because the stock was sold at a gain for Stewart. She had sold many other stocks earlier in December at a loss for tax purposes.

In January 2002, as the investigation into Stewart's stock sale was growing, Faneuil described the explanation that an animated Bacanovic gave him in a discussion in Bacanovic's office.

Faneuil said Bacanovic told him: "Listen, I've spoken to Martha, I met with her, and everyone's telling the same story. This was a \$60 stop-loss order. That was the reason for her sale. We're all on the same page, and it's the truth. It's a true story."

Stewart glanced back and forth at Faneuil and prosecutor Karen Patton Seymour while Faneuil testified, making notes on a legal pad. Bacanovic made notes as well, and appeared to scoff occasionally when Faneuil



Stewart

described parts of the story that included him.

Faneuil's testimony is the centerpiece of the government's case against Stewart and Bacanovic, who are accused of repeatedly lying to investigators by insisting they had struck the \$60 arrangement before the sale.

Stewart faces five counts carrying a potential prison term of 30 years. Bacanovic faces five counts carrying 25 years. Both would likely get lighter sentences if convicted.

Faneuil originally supported Stewart and Bacanovic's version, but struck a deal with the government in June 2002 to plead guilty to a misdemeanor

and cooperate with prosecutors.

Asked Wednesday to explain why he changed his story, Faneuil said: "There came a point in time where I just couldn't continue to lie. I felt that the coverup was part of my daily existence, and I just couldn't take it anymore."

As cross-examination began, Faneuil admitted he has used cocaine, marijuana and the party drugs Ecstasy and ketamine, sometimes called Special K. But he described the cocaine and ketamine uses as extremely limited, and said he had never been under the influence of any drugs during the workday at Merrill Lynch.

He also acknowledged that Bacanovic never "explicitly" directed him to lie.

David Apfel, a lawyer for Bacanovic, asked questions intended to show Faneuil was willing to tell the government whatever it wanted in exchange for not being prosecuted.

But when Apfel asked Faneuil whether he knew it was a violation of Merrill Lynch policy to pass information about Waksal's account to another client, he implicated Bacanovic.

"Peter told me it was something I should do," Faneuil answered. "I never dreamed that he'd be telling me to commit a crime."

A routine clause in Faneuil's 2002 cooperation agreement requires him not to break the law.

Stewart's attorney, Robert Morillo, claims Faneuil broke that clause when he smoked marijuana on an April 2003 trip to Jamaica, and said the government should have "torn up" its agreement with Faneuil.

But the judge did not allow defense lawyers to ask Faneuil about the trip, saying such a line of questioning amounted to "an attack on the motive of the government in presenting this case."

Faneuil is to return for more cross-examination Thursday.

Faneuil testified earlier that on Dec. 27, he took calls before 10 a.m. from Waksal's accountant and Waksal's two daughters—all demanding that Faneuil sell their ImClone shares.

Bacanovic ordered him to "get Martha on the phone" when he learned of the selling, and she called Bacanovic's office that day just after 1:30 p.m.

"Hi, this is Martha," Faneuil said the call began. "What's going on with Sam?"

Faneuil said he related the information about the Waksal selling, and that Stewart wondered aloud how she could be sure her own sale had been completed.

Faneuil said he suggested he could send an e-mail to Stewart's assistant, but Stewart told him he could "absolutely not" discuss her personal business with her assistant.

"Ms. Stewart started getting extremely upset," Faneuil said.

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Nation

Teams search Capitol mail for ricin

By ALAN FRAM
AP WRITER

WASHINGTON (AP)—A Senate rattled by a ricin attack began returning to normalcy Wednesday, and the lack of any reported illnesses prompted leaders to plan to reopen shuttered office buildings.

As lawmakers awaited the results of tests measuring the potency of the powdery poison, officials said none of the several dozen workers who were potentially exposed seemed ill. Senators voted—for the first time this week—on a judgeship nomination, and at least three Senate committees held hearings, though they borrowed rooms in House office buildings to do so.

“Everybody’s doing great,” Frist told reporters. “We’re outside the window where you’d expect to see symptoms at all, and it seems well contained.”

Bowing to growing complaints, Senate leaders were even letting senators and aides briefly re-enter their offices to remove needed documents and equipment. That included the very fourth-floor corridor in the Dirksen Senate office building where the deadly toxin was discovered Monday in the mailroom of Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn.

“It’s completely normal in there,” said Laurie Schultz Heim, an aide to Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., who said she spent less than 10 minutes removing items from his offices, which are next to Frist’s.

She said she had worn no protective clothes and noticed nothing unusual other than two machines in the hallway that seemed to be filtering air.

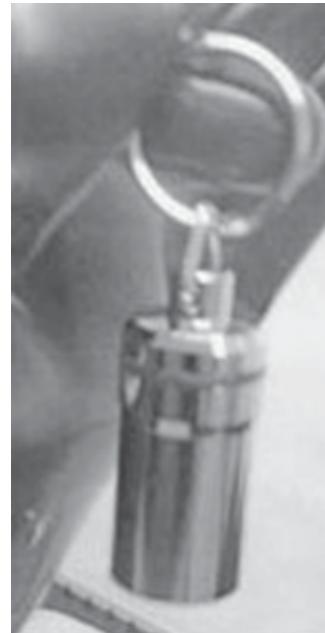
Inmate executed for 1985 murder

STARKE, Fla. (AP)—After a short delay caused by the Supreme Court, a man was executed Wednesday evening for the 1985 murder of a woman who was raped and shot in a cemetery.

Johnny L. Robinson, 51, was condemned for the slaying of Beverly St. George, whose car had broken down in St. Johns County in northeastern Florida.

He was originally scheduled to die by injection at 6 p.m. at Florida State Prison, but 15 minutes before the process was to begin the Supreme Court asked the state “to wait for further word.”

Shortly after 7 p.m., the nation’s high court voted 5-4 to deny all appeal issues, including that Robinson’s sentence was the result of racism against blacks, that a co-defendant had recanted testimony against him, and that Florida’s method



“You never know in the next hour what you will find,” Frist said.

Although ricin inhaled or injected can kill quickly, the incident—so far—seemed to be causing less tension than the anthrax letters sent to Capitol Hill in October 2001. Lawmakers and aides said that was because being

targeted by a biochemical substance is no longer novel for Congress, and because initial indications were that the ricin hadn’t spread into the air.

“There isn’t quite the same sense of anxiety,” said Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., whose office was hit by the first anthrax attack.

The FBI and 100 Marines from the corps’ Chemical Biological Incident Response Force were investigating.

Among other things, investigators were seeking a link Wednesday between the ricin in Frist’s office and ricin-laden letters found last fall in mail facilities serving the White

House and the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport in South Carolina.

So far, they said, they had found no such connection. They also said they had yet to find precisely how the ricin had made it to Frist’s mailroom, said U.S. Capitol police chief Terrance Gainer.

AP
This undated image released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation shows a small metal vial of ricin found in a threatening letter addressed to the Transportation Department discovered at a U.S. Postal facility in Greenville, S.C., on October 15, 2003. The vial was contained in a letter warning that more ricin would be used unless new federal trucking regulations were scrapped. Investigators are trying to determine if the same person or persons sent ricin-laced mail to the Washington office of Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., found on Monday, Feb. 2, 2004.

Among those expressing irritation was Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa.

He said he is “livid” about how “one terrorist spreading rat poison can bring the government to half mast.”

Yet with the entire Capitol complex subject to continuous air sampling and all congressional mail being collected and examined, no one was willing to say the threat was over.

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Bush backs more time for 9/11 report

By SCOTT LINDLAW
AP WRITER

WASHINGTON (AP)—President Bush reversed himself Wednesday and said he now supports giving a commission investigating the 9/11 attacks more time to produce a final report.

The commission is scheduled to finish its work on May 27. But panel members last month asked Congress for a two-month extension, citing a need for full analysis of reams of documents about the disaster.

Bush had resisted that request for months, saying through his spokesmen that the administration wanted the panel

to complete its work as soon as possible. Privately, White House aides feared that delaying the commission's final report would result in a potentially damaging assessment of the administration's handling of pre-attack intelligence in the heat of a presidential campaign.

On Wednesday, the White House relented, saying it backed moving the deadline to July 26.

But White House spokesman Scott McClellan also urged the commission to wrap up its work 30 days after that. If Congress accepts Bush's recommendation, the report would arrive at the end of August, just as the presidential campaign is entering the post-

Labor Day final stretch.

"The president is pleased to support the commission's request, and we urge Congress to act quickly to extend the timetable for an additional 60 days for the commission to complete its work," McClellan said. The administration changed course because it became convinced the panel needed the extra time, he said.

At the same time, he urged the panel to act quickly. "If the commission has information that can help prevent another catastrophic terrorist attack on America soil, we need to have that information as soon as possible," McClellan said.

The 9/11 panel—known formally as the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States—was established by Congress to study the nation's preparedness before Sept. 11, 2001 and its response to the attacks, and to make recommendations for guarding against similar disasters.

The 10-member, bipartisan group held a two-day hearing that highlighted a series of government missteps in customs and aviation security that allowed many of the 19 hijackers to elude detection.

The commission said it plans to meet this weekend with national security adviser

Condoleezza Rice and is trying to set up interviews with President Bush as well as officials from the Clinton administration.

McClellan was noncommittal Wednesday about whether Bush would submit to an interview by the commission.

Relatives of Sept. 11 victims proposed last week extending the mandate until January. That would give commissioners the time they need, while keeping

the review outside of presidential politics, they said. Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., said they planned to introduce legislation next week that will set a Jan. 10, 2005, deadline for the report.

Bush abandoned his previous position at a time when he is preparing to form a separate panel on intelligence leading up to the war in Iraq and on other intelligence relating to weapons of mass destruction.

Man being questioned about abduction of 11-year-old girl

By MITCH STACY
AP WRITER

SARASOTA, Fla. (AP)—A drug felon was being questioned Wednesday in the disappearance of an 11-year-old girl who was apparently kidnapped while walking home from a friend's house, authorities said. The girl's whereabouts were not immediately known.

Joseph P. Smith, 37, has been in custody since Tuesday on unrelated charges that officials did not specify. His car, a Buick Century station wagon, was being searched by investigators in a search for clues in the disappearance of Carlie Brucia, whose apparent abduction was captured by a car wash surveillance camera.

"We have strong evidence that he is in fact the perpetrator," said Capt. Jeff Bell, the lead Sarasota County sheriff's investigator on the case.

Col. Terry Lewis called it an "ongoing, dynamic investigation." He said his investigative team will continue working through the night, but would not have further comment until a press briefing Thursday morning.

Sheriff Bill Balkwill said investigators were led to Smith after a tip was phoned in by a citizen.

Surveillance video footage of Brucia's apparent abduction showed a man in his late 20s or early 30s in a mechanic's shirt with a name patch on one lapel. Investigators said he also had tattoos on both forearms.

Smith has many tattoos on his body, including on both arms, officials said.

From the photos, Carlie did not appear to know him, and the girl's parents said they did not recognize him.

The FBI worked with a NASA image lab to enhance the images. Balkwill did not say whether those

enhanced images helped lead them to Smith.

"I think it's helping them out quite a bit and giving them details they need to solve this case," said Armando Oliu, who is overseeing the image lab.

Friends from the girl's former Girl Scout troop took a day off from school Wednesday to pass out fliers at malls, canvass neighborhoods and distribute pink ribbons adorned with Carlie's name.

"I don't feel too good about this, knowing my best friend is out there with a stranger," said Tiffany Meeks.

Many people pulled up to the site of the abduction, rolled down the windows of their cars and asked deputies how they could help. Officials were creating "a database of volunteer support" to try to locate the girl.

The girl's father, Joe Brucia, looked exhausted when he appeared on national television Wednesday morning.

"I'm doing OK. I have to be for Carlie's sake," he said on ABC's "Good Morning America." "I always have hope. I maintain that. I have to. I look forward to my daughter's safe return."

Meanwhile, after speaking with a psychic, Carlie's family hired a private investigator to assist in the search. Chuck Chambers, a private investigator from neighboring Bradenton, said Carlie's family hired him Tuesday after consulting with an "investigative psychic" who "provided them with addresses and clues."

Steven Kansler, Carlie's stepfather, said the family was encouraged because the psychic feels Carlie is still alive, but is "somewhere dark and tied up," according to the psychic.

Carlie's family is frustrated at times, but remains hopeful that the girl is coming home.

"I know Carlie is a strong-willed person," Kansler said. "She's full of life and she's not going to give up."

triathlon



Smith

Young inmates in Calif. being caged, drugged

By DON THOMPSON
AP WRITER

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP)—Young California inmates are often locked in cages as punishment, and those with mental problems are frequently drugged and improperly cared for, a state-funded study says.

The California Youth Authority is supposed to rehabilitate its 4,600 young wards, but instead often focuses on punishment such as isolating offenders in wire cages, two experts said in a confidential report obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press.

Inadequately trained therapists frequently treated youths suffering mental illness and substance abuse problems with prescription drugs instead of providing proper therapy. A majority of the wards suffer mental or drug-abuse problems.

State officials are not disputing the findings, and Youth

and Adult Correctional Agency spokesman Tip Kindel said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration inherited the problems but is trying to fix them "on a fast track."

"The vast majority of youths who have mental health needs are made worse instead of improved by the correctional environment," reported University of Washington child psychologist Eric Trupin and forensic psychiatrist Raymond Patterson of Washington, D.C.

Drugs are frequently administered to restrain misbehaving youths who are of no apparent danger to themselves or others, while, "In a number of facilities, psychiatric evaluations are cursory and do not meet accepted professional standards," the report said.

Widespread use of so-called "chemical restraints" is intolerable, said Sen. Gloria Romero, who chairs a

corrections oversight committee.

"This is not the 1930s. Even in mental hospitals, I thought we'd gotten rid of these practices long ago," she said.

The state-funded report is the first of six being conducted as part of a class-action lawsuit by the San Francisco-based nonprofit Prison Law Office alleging poor conditions and treatment at the state's 11 youth institutions, which handle young people up to age 25.

The experts said there's been some progress, but cited wide variations among the nine institutions they reviewed.

The report's release comes a week after two teenage boys hanged themselves at the Preston Youth Correctional Facility in Ione, east of Sacramento.

"We have got a serious problem, and before another teenager commits suicide the California Youth Authority has got to get its act together," Romero said.

Fla. woman breathes after declared dead

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. (AP)—Nearly an hour and a half after rescuers declared an 88-year-old woman dead inside a burning car, investigators at the scene realized she was still breathing.

Now, officials are reviewing the Wednesday morning incident, trying to figure out what went wrong in determining the condition of Barbara Clark, who died later that day.

Clark and her 87-year-old husband, John Clark, were found beside the road in their burning 1994 Volvo 850 about 4:20 a.m.

Firefighters put out the blaze and tried to rescue the couple but found no vital signs, Lt. John King said. They declared the couple dead about 4:40 a.m.

According to the police report, firefighters secured the car and waited for investigators to arrive.

Volusia County spokesman Dave Byron said a Medical Examiner's Office employee and crime-scene investigators noticed Barbara Clark was still breathing about 6 a.m. Rescuers began first aid and called an ambulance, but she died about 12 minutes later.

Whether Clark could have been saved if someone had noticed earlier that she was still alive is one of many questions investigators hope to answer.

"All of the decisions that were made at the scene—what went into treatment at the scene—will be part of the review," Byron told the Orlando Sentinel for Thursday's editions.

Driver found dead in Colo. may be suspect

JOHNSTON, Iowa (AP)—Authorities believe a motorist who killed himself Wednesday after a short pursuit on a Colorado highway is a 16-year-old they had been searching for since a house sitter and a social worker were found shot to death at his Iowa home.

The body was not immediately identified, but Mesa County Sheriff's spokeswoman Wendy Likes said "everything per our investigation leads us to believe" it is that of Tyler Pirtle. Police did not reveal a possible motive.

After authorities launched a nationwide search, a car matching the description of the red 1995 Mercury Mystique that Pirtle was believed to have been driving was found along Interstate 70 in western Colorado, 900 miles away, Johnston Police Chief Bruce Gaddis said.

A sheriff's deputy saw the car speeding on I-70 near Grand Junction, but lost track of the car as it neared the Utah border, authorities said. Minutes later the deputy saw the car heading back the opposite direction and followed it.

The driver pulled the car 50 feet off the side of the road. The deputy ran the license plates and realized the driver could be dangerous, Likes said.

10-month-old girl drowns in toilet

LONDON, Ky. (AP)—A 10-month-old girl drowned after falling into a toilet in her family's home, police said.

Brianna Morgan, who had just begun learning to crawl and walk, got into the bathroom, then pulled herself on top of her mother's jewelry box which was on the floor, police said. She apparently leaned over and fell headfirst into the toilet, which held 6

inches of water.

Brianna's 10-year-old brother discovered her and pulled her out of the toilet as another brother dialed 911, WLEX-TV reported. Their mother, who had been in the basement, tried CPR but couldn't revive her daughter. Police said Brianna, who was a twin, might have been in the water as long as three minutes.

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Mass. court clears way for gay marriages

By JENNIFER PETER
AP WRITER

BOSTON (AP)—The Massachusetts high court declared Wednesday that gays are entitled to nothing less than marriage and that Vermont-style civil unions will not suffice, setting the stage for the nation's first legally sanctioned same-sex weddings by the spring.

The court issued the advisory opinion at the request of legislators who wanted to know whether civil unions would be enough to satisfy the court after its November ruling that said gay couples are entitled to all the rights of marriage. That decision had been written in

such a way that it left open the possibility that civil unions might be allowed.

But Wednesday's opinion by the Supreme Judicial Court left no doubt: Only marriage would pass constitutional muster.

"The history of our nation has demonstrated that separate is seldom, if ever, equal," four justices wrote. "For no rational reason the marriage laws of the commonwealth discriminate against a defined class; no amount of tinkering with language will eradicate that stain. The (civil unions) bill would have the effect of maintaining and fostering a stigma of exclusion that the Constitution prohibits."

Paul Martinek, editor of Lawyers Weekly USA, said that the blunt opinion erases any confusion.

"The fat lady has sung and she's singing the wedding march," Martinek said. "It's clear from reading the majority opinion that there's no basis on which the (court) will OK anything other than marriage."

The much-anticipated opinion came a week before next Wednesday's Constitutional Convention, where the Legislature will consider an amendment backed by Republican Gov. Mitt Romney that would define marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

But the soonest a constitu-

tional amendment could end up on the ballot would be 2006, meaning that until then, the high court's decision will be Massachusetts law. Gay couples could get married in Massachusetts as soon as May, the deadline set by the court last fall.

"We're going to have to start looking for a band," said Ed Balmelli, who put down a deposit for a wedding after the opinion.

The case represents a significant milestone in a year that has seen broad new recognitions of gay rights in America, Canada and abroad, including a June U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down a Texas ban on gay sex.

The White House called the

Massachusetts ruling "deeply troubling."

"Activist judges continue to seek to redefine marriage by court order without regard for the will of the people," said presidential spokesman Scott McClellan.

The legal battle in Massachusetts began in 2001, when

seven gay couples went to their city and town halls to obtain marriage licenses. All were denied, leading them to sue the state.

The Supreme Judicial Court ruled in November that gay couples have a constitutional right to marry, and gave the Legislature six months to change state laws to make it happen.

Boy charged with murder of classmate

PALMETTO BAY, Fla. (AP)—A 14-year-old boy was charged with murder in the slaying of a classmate, a musician and baseball player who was found bleeding to death in a middle school bathroom.

A fellow student said the victim and his accused killer were friends who competed with each other to get top grades.

Jaime Rodrigo Gough, 14, was found early Tuesday at Southwood Middle School, a magnet school specializing in visual and performing arts, authorities said. His neck had been slashed.

Michael Hernandez, 14, signed a statement admitting he killed the boy and the knife used in the attack was found in his backpack, Miami-Dade County police Detective Randy Rossman said Wednesday. Police had obtained a search warrant for the backpack.

Hernandez was charged with first-degree murder late Tuesday and waived his right to appear Wednesday in juvenile court. He was placed in secure detention.

The slaying was the second inside a school this week. A 17-year-old boy was shot in a

Washington, D.C., high school hallway Monday.

Police said Gough and Hernandez knew each other, but refused to discuss a possible motive Wednesday.

Twelve-year-old Genesis Llapur said she dated Hernandez for about a month last year. She described him as a good student in honors classes who often competed with Gough and other children for better grades.

"They were really good friends. I don't know what happened," she said.

A judge set a Feb. 24 hearing in the case after prosecutors asked for time to decide whether to seek a grand jury indictment and try the teen as an adult. Prosecutors and Hernandez's public defender declined to comment.

Juveniles accused of first-degree murder in Florida are usually charged as adults. If convicted of first-degree murder as an adult, he would be sentenced to life in prison without parole.

The school in Palmetto Bay, one of Miami-Dade County's wealthiest cities, did not have a history of violence, Miami-Dade School spokesman Mayco Villafana said.

Lawyers mull recording interrogations

Both police and defense lawyers sometimes find that a video camera in the interrogation room or the patrol car can help their case. Police may show a suspect wasn't roughed up, for example, or a defendant can use the tape to back up allegations that detectives were heavy-handed.

As the cameras become more common, however, police and attorneys are divided over whether they should be a mandatory part of any questioning session between a suspect and an officer.

The nation's largest lawyers group is considering an endorsement of mandatory taping in all states. The plan will be debated by the American Bar Association, which begins its winter meeting in San Antonio on Thursday.

Critics complain that recording devices will chill talkative defendants, or that

cases will be ruined by taping lapses.

One state, Illinois, already has a law requiring police to tape interrogations of murder suspects.

Miami lawyer Neal Sonnett said prosecutors and criminal defense attorneys share concerns about problems at trial reconstructing what happened in interrogations.

Jurors often have to rely on an officer's notes or recollections, he said, and "it becomes the defendant's word against the officer's word."

The ABA proposal says that state lawmakers or courts should approve rules for videotaping suspects in custody. Audio taping could be done when videotaping is impractical, the recommendation says. Drafters said it was prompted by coerced false confessions in Illinois and other states.

Some legislatures have already been studying the issue. (AP)

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Kerry's chief rivals face some steep odds

By RON FOURNIER
AP POLITICAL WRITER

John Kerry's chief rivals all but ceded three weekend elections to the high-striding presidential front-runner on Wednesday, covering their retreat with fresh claims that he is a flip-flopping Washington insider who would lead the party to defeat this fall.

Southern natives John Edwards and Wesley Clark pointed their cash-strapped campaigns to next Tuesday's elections in Tennessee and Virginia, gambling that they can survive to fight Kerry in Wisconsin Feb. 17. A third challenger, Howard Dean, also had his sights set on a Wisconsin showdown.

The odds are stacked against all three. In a war of attrition, Kerry has the most allies, the longest supply lines and weakened adversaries.

"Without money, you can't have the troops. Without troops, you can't compete. How can you compete with a guy who can write himself a check for ads in California?" said Michigan pollster Ed Sarpolus.

Clark, Edwards and Dean hope to rise out of Wisconsin as the only alternative to Kerry when the race turns to contests in California, New York and eight other "Super Tuesday" states March 2.

Two officials close to Clark,

speaking on condition of anonymity, said the retired Army general considered dropping out of the race Tuesday night after scoring a single victory, a nail-biter in Oklahoma. They said his wife, Gert, helped talk him into staying in the race against the advice of some backers.

In another sign of trouble, Clark's staff agreed to a pay freeze to pay for television ads.

The hopes of Edwards, Clark and Dean hinged on two matters that were out of their control—Kerry's performance and his past. A plodding and imperfect campaigner, the Massachusetts senator could make a mistake or be scorched under the spotlight cast upon his nearly 20-year record in the Senate.

To that end, the challengers are trumpeting media reports about Kerry's ties to special interests and lobbyists.

"If we're going to have a president who's not a Washington insider, who knows the changes that need to take place in Washington to change America, I need to be the president," Edwards told CNN the day after he won South Carolina to keep his candidacy alive.

Kerry won five states and the lion's share of the delegates Tuesday, taking command of the race. Of the 269 delegates up for grabs, Kerry won 144, Edwards 66, Clark 50, Dean seven and Al

Sharpton two.

ACROSS THE NATION

Work-study job at Hooters draws school ire

GUYTON, Ga. (AP)—A high school senior's choice for a work-study job was a little too racy in the eyes of her superintendent.

Laura Williams, 17, took a job about a month ago as a hostess at a Hooters restaurant, the national chain known for its scantily clad waitresses. Superintendent Michael Moore has asked Williams to quit, saying the job is not appropriate for a work-study program.

"I have questions in my mind because of the advertising and sexual connotations," Moore said.

But Larry Williams said he does not mind his daughter working at the restaurant. He planned to appeal to the school board and argue that his daughter should be allowed to keep her job.

"I went to Hooters for an hour, and six families came in for supper during that time," he said. "This is a chain restaurant with high standards."

Earlier in the school year, Laura Williams got a job

cleaning homes and businesses, but was encouraged by a school adviser to find a job where her performance could be better monitored, her father said.

Ga. lawmakers mull smoking-in-cars law

ATLANTA (AP)—Georgia lawmakers are considering a first-in-the-nation law that would require drivers who smoke to roll down the windows before lighting up with children in the car.

The measure, approved 9-0 Wednesday by a state House committee, would impose a \$15 fine.

Supporters say toddlers need legal protection from second-hand smoke. Opponents consider the measure intrusive.

The House narrowly approved the measure last year, but the Senate rejected the idea. The bill will not get a better reception this year, said Sen. Eric Johnson, a Senate leader.

"That's not to say that smoking in a car with small children isn't wrong. It's horribly wrong," he said. "But if we're going to make everything bad for you illegal, and then fine you \$15 for doing it, we could balance the budget just on that."

No other state restricts smoking in private cars.

Cubans in car-boat are stopped at sea

MIAMI (AP)—Eleven Cubans trying to sail to Florida in a 1950s Buick converted into a tailfinned boat were intercepted at sea by the Coast Guard and will be sent back to their homeland, exile activists said Wednesday.

Marcel Basanta Lopez and Luis Grass Rodriguez, the two men who turned the classic car into a floating vessel, tried a similar stunt last summer and got caught: They set out for Florida in a 1951 Chevy pickup with pontoons made out of empty 55-gallon drums and a propeller that pushed it along at about 8 mph.

On Monday, the men set out again, with four other adults and five children, relatives said. The Coast Guard intercepted the group late Tuesday en route to the Florida Keys, picking them up about 10 miles off Marathon, which is about 90 miles southwest of Miami, activist Arturo Cobo said.

Cobo said the Coast Guard sank the Buick. The Coast Guard refused to confirm the floating car's status, but it used machine gun fire to sink the first vehicle-powered barge.

"My uncle is very brave,"

Eduardo Perez Grass, a nephew of Grass Rodriguez, said in Havana, adding that the others on board were Grass Rodriguez's wife and son; Marcel Basanta's wife and their two children; and a third couple with two children.

Charges stand in fatal fire crew crash

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP)—A judge on Wednesday refused to dismiss charges against a firefighting company over the deaths of one of its crews in a van crash last summer.

Eight firefighters working for First Strike Environmental, of Roseburg, were killed when their van crashed in eastern Oregon as they were returning from an Idaho wildfire.

The company is charged with reckless endangerment and drunken driving, punishable by fines. The prosecution alleges supervisors at First Strike knew a large amount of alcohol had been bought during the firefighters' trip home.

Umatilla County Judge Garry Reynolds rejected company arguments that it was also a victim in the case, and that a prosecutor failed to provide enough detail about the alleged drinking blamed for the crash.

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Shippers, ports may face security fines

By LESLIE MILLER
AP WRITER

WASHINGTON (AP)—The Coast Guard on Wednesday began imposing \$10,000 fines against shippers and ports that missed a year-end deadline to submit terrorism protection plans.

Congress had ordered the shipping industry to tighten security in November 2002 amid fears that terrorists might smuggle radiological weapons in a cargo container or attack fuel farms or chemical facilities at a port.

Port facilities and ship owners had until Dec. 31 to turn in vulnerability assessment reports and security plans, but

the Coast Guard estimated only about 42 percent complied by year's end. The Coast Guard said that number has risen to 90 percent.

"We have made tremendous progress protecting the ports, and we need everyone to continue that progress by meeting those requirements," Rear Adm. Larry Hereth, the Coast Guard's director of port security, said in a statement.

The plans are a prerequisite for a July 1 deadline requiring ships, ports, ferry terminals and fuel-chemical tank farms to implement tighter security measures. The Coast Guard said it has started to impose fines of \$10,000. Those that don't

comply face more fines of up to \$25,000 and could be shut down after July 1 if approved security plans aren't in place.

The Coast Guard originally estimated 10,000 vessels and 5,000 port facilities were required to provide plans, but since revised that to 8,500 vessels and 3,200 port facilities. To date, they've received 7,600 vessel plans and 2,800 facility plans.

Port facilities include small inland terminals that handle riverboat gambling cruises and major cargo terminals that handle tens of millions of tons of cargo. Owners and operators of tugboats, cruise ships and oceangoing container carriers must submit reports, though

most foreign-flagged vessels are exempt.

Maureen Ellis, spokeswoman for the Association of American Port Authorities, said three-fourths of its 82-member port authorities said they turned in their plans, including Philadelphia, Miami, New York and New Jersey. The rest hadn't replied to the association's query, she said.

Jack Riley, director of public safety and justice at the Rand Corporation, said it's more important for security to be tightened at large ports because of their strategic importance to the U.S. economy.

He said the problem is that the plans may be wish lists that

have no realistic hope of being funded. Even if they did, it's unclear that the money would be spent in the right place, he said.

"If I had an extra \$10 million

and I could spend it on any aspect of security, where would it have the most impact? I really don't think we have the answer to that at this point," he said.

Columbia investigator fears rushed launch

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP)—An investigator of the Columbia disaster fears more astronauts will die if NASA rushes ahead with a space shuttle launch this fall without making all the needed repairs.

"An early launch could create the same conditions which cost us 16 lives," Air Force Brig. Gen. Duane Deal said earlier this week. He was referring to the crews of the Columbia and Challenger and two men who died in a helicopter crash while searching for shuttle debris.

NASA's top spaceflight official insists, however, that the plan for resuming shuttle flights as early as September or October will be driven by milestones, not schedule. He stressed Wednesday that those months are merely planning dates.

"If we don't meet milestones, we don't fly in September or October. It's that simple," said Bill Read, a former shuttle commander in charge of the spaceflight office.

Read said he appreciates that "there are concerns out there."

"That's normal," he said. "It's part of the open discussions that we have about all these items, that show that we've learned an awful lot here in the year since the accident, paid tremendous attention to the very thoughtful commentary and the recommendations and observations of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board."

Deal, commander of the 21st Space Wing at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado, has investigated about a dozen military aircraft and rocket accidents. He said in an e-mail Tuesday that he stays in touch with shuttle workers who tell him pressure is building to launch this fall.

He said workers also have confided to him that there is still resistance within NASA to institutional change.

In their final report last summer, Deal and the other Columbia investigators blamed the Feb. 1, 2003, accident not only on a piece of flyaway foam, but also NASA's broken safety culture. The general wrote a supplemental report citing numerous other safety infractions that he said could be the next O-ring or piece of foam.

Deal, said progress is lacking on some of the critical recommendations made by the investigators, especially regarding the inspection and repair of damaged shuttle wings in orbit.

NASA works on Spirit's memory problem

PASADENA, Calif. (AP)—NASA awakened its Mars rover Spirit early Wednesday and started the delicate process of cleaning old files out of its memory to cure it of the problems that have delayed its search for signs that the planet was once a wetter place.

The process did not begin until after four days of tests.

"It's not an operation that we do lightly," Mark Adler, a deputy mission manager, said at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

The six-wheeled vehicle was ordered to conserve power before being awakened. Two hours later it began the four-hour process of reformatting its flash memory, which involves erasing all the contents.

Scientists believe a buildup of too many files in the flash memory caused the rover to stop transmitting data back to Earth beginning Jan. 21. Spirit briefly resumed science operations earlier this week before NASA once again halted the work to finish correcting the memory problem.

The rover was expected to resume normal operations late Wednesday.

On the other side of Mars, the twin rover Opportunity was readied for a little road trip. Its destination was a rock formation where instruments suggest there are higher concentrations of hematite—a mineral that can form in water—than had been found at its current site.

Geologic evidence of water would support the possibility that Mars once had life. The rovers have found intriguing geological data, but scientists remained cautious.

"With respect to extrapolating from a few grains of sand to a story about water on Mars—little hard to do at this point," said Steven Squyres, the mission's principal scientist.

Spirit landed on Mars on Jan. 3, followed three weeks later by Opportunity.

MEGABYTE tony

Malaysia extends al-Qaida suspect's term

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP)—Malaysia has extended for two more years the imprisonment of a terror suspect linked to al-Qaida's attempts to produce chemical and biological weapons, saying he has more information about terrorist operations.

Yazid Sufaat, a U.S.-trained biochemist and former Malaysian army captain, was arrested in late 2001 as he returned home from Afghanistan, where officials say he was working on a biological and chemical weapons program for al-Qaida that was ended by the U.S.-led war.

Since then, he has been held without trial under Malaysia's Internal Security Act on accusations of being a member of Jemaah Islamiyah, an al-Qaida ally in Southeast Asia.

Yazid, 40, has been described as a key aide of Riduan Isamuddin, better known as Hambali, an Indonesian who was operational chief of Jemaah Islamiyah and a high-ranking al-Qaida leader.

Hambali was arrested in Thailand last August and is in U.S. custody. He is believed to have given up information on al-Qaida and Jemaah Islamiyah plots and personnel.

Malaysian officials have said Yazid has only selectively cooperated in responding to questions, but knows more about the chemical and biological weapons program than Hambali.

A senior Malaysian official said Yazid could verify information provided by Hambali. The official spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The Security Act allows for indefinite detention without trial, in two-year stints authorized by government orders. Yazid's first two-year detention order had been due to expire Friday.

Violence closes Thaischools, temples

BANGKOK, Thailand (AP)—More than 1,000 schools closed and some monks evacuated their temples as tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in southern Thailand heightened, officials and media reports said Wednesday.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said local leaders from the Muslim-dominated south told him some groups behind the violence received foreign funds. He did not elaborate.

Public schools will remain closed this week while government officials discuss security measures for teachers, who are receiving death threats.

The recent violence

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is also home minister in charge of security, signed a new detention order effective Friday.

Yazid is the most high-profile terrorist suspect among about 70 detained in Malaysia. FBI agents interrogated Yazid in November 2002, but failed to get much information. Malaysian authorities have indicated they would consider an FBI request to interview him again, but have ruled out extradition.

Security officials have told AP that Yazid described the chemical and biological weapons program he and Hambali were building for al-Qaida as being in the "conceptual stages" when their plans were interrupted by the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

Yazid graduated from California State University-Sacramento in 1987 with a biochemistry degree. He returned home and joined the army, reaching captain.

After leaving the military and starting a computer business, Yazid began attending religious classes run by Hambali, and was recruited into his budding terror network.

Yazid is accused of allowing Hambali and other top al-Qaida operatives—including two eventual Sept. 11 hijackers—to use an apartment he owned for meetings in Malaysia in January 2000. He also is accused of giving a false letter of employment to Sept. 11 suspect Zacarias Moussaoui that helped him enter the United States.

Jemaah Islamiyah is blamed for the October 2002 nightclub bombings on the Indonesian island of Bali that killed 202 people and a hotel bombing in Jakarta last August that killed 12 people.

Philippine military detains six officers

By JIM GOMEZ
AP WRITER

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—

The Philippine military said Wednesday it detained six junior officers on suspicion of making inflammatory political statements, after a TV network aired video of five soldiers apparently calling for the resignation of the defense secretary.

The military denied there was any political unrest.

Private TV channel GMA Network on Wednesday broadcast the tape of five men in army fatigues saying they were "forced by fateful

developments to cross the line of protocol" to denounce "the shameful and dangerous politicization" of the military.

They called for Defense Secretary Eduardo Ermita to resign, claiming he was leading President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's campaign for the May 10 presidential elections.

The soldiers' faces were hidden behind a Philippine flag and they refused to give their names.

But chief of staff Gen. Narciso Abaya said the military had discovered their identities and detained six junior officers for questioning. The military

has launched an investigation, he said.

It wasn't clear if any of the six soldiers arrested were among the five men who appeared on TV.

The soldiers could be charged for "conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman" if it is proven that they were behind the statement, Abaya said.

"We also know who are the people behind them and it's very sad to note that this group of officers allowed themselves to be used by some unscrupulous groups.... We will make sure that they will be accountable for their actions," he said.

Abaya denied there was unrest

in the military and reiterated his order to commanders to remain politically neutral.

The defense minister denied he has any role in Arroyo's campaign and rejected accusations he has ordered soldiers to spy on Arroyo's major rivals.

The Philippines has struggled with military unrest in recent years. In July, Arroyo's government suppressed a mutiny by junior officers who alleged the military was corrupt.

The military played a major role in ousting both the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and former President Joseph Estrada in 2001.

TRIATHLON FORM

DON'T DRINK & DRIVE!

China's Hu signs major deals with French

By JOHN LEICESTER
AP WRITER

PARIS (AP)—A market hungry for investment. Millions of people to transport. Power needs to supply. Having scored wins on Taiwan and ties with Europe, China's president attended to business on Wednesday, luring heavyweight French firms with enticing visions of his nation's surging economy.

Wrapping up his three-day visit, Hu Jintao was to preside over the signing of nine business and research deals Wednesday, covering electronics, nuclear power, car manufacturing and other industries, French Prime

Minster Jean-Pierre Raffarin's office said.

The Chinese president first hosted a "Who's Who" of major French business leaders at his Paris hotel Wednesday morning. He outlined China's economic needs, the opening of its markets as a relatively new member of the World Trade Organization, and its desire for foreign investment and technology, participants said.

Doing business in China "has become a reality for many of us instead of just the long-term ambition that it was still a few years ago," said Henri Proglio, chairman of French utilities group Veolia. Last month, it

signed a contract worth \$10.7 billion over 50 years to manage water supply and treatment in the Chinese city of Shenzhen.

France feels its economic ties with China have not kept pace with the political friendship between the two nations, but French officials hope Hu's visit will help change that. Hu leaves Thursday after a brief visit to European aircraft maker Airbus.

Hu won strong support from French President Jacques Chirac for the ending of a European arms embargo imposed on China after it crushed democracy demonstrations 15 years ago. Chirac also took China's side against Taiwan, sternly warning

the island against its referendum plans for March. Beijing claims Taiwan as part of its territory and opposes the vote.

While Hu thanked France for its support, Taiwan's government expressed "strong displeasure" Wednesday.

The 14 companies that sent their top brass to shake hands with Hu and listen to his sales pitch Wednesday ranged from oil giant Total to engineering and telecommunications companies Alstom and Alcatel, as well as defense and aerospace companies Thales and EADS and hotel operator Accor.

Deals to be signed Wednesday included a \$758



AP
Chinese President Hu Jintao listens to speeches during a visit at the Paris townhall Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2004. Former mayor Jean Tiberi is visible at right.

million investment accord between car maker PSA Peugeot Citroen and its Chinese partner Dongfeng to double production at their plant in Wuhan, central China, a spokesman for the French company said.

French glass maker Saint-Gobain, meanwhile, was to sign a deal with China's Luoyang Float Glass Group, and electronics companies Thomson of France and China's TCL International were to finalize a previously announced joint venture.

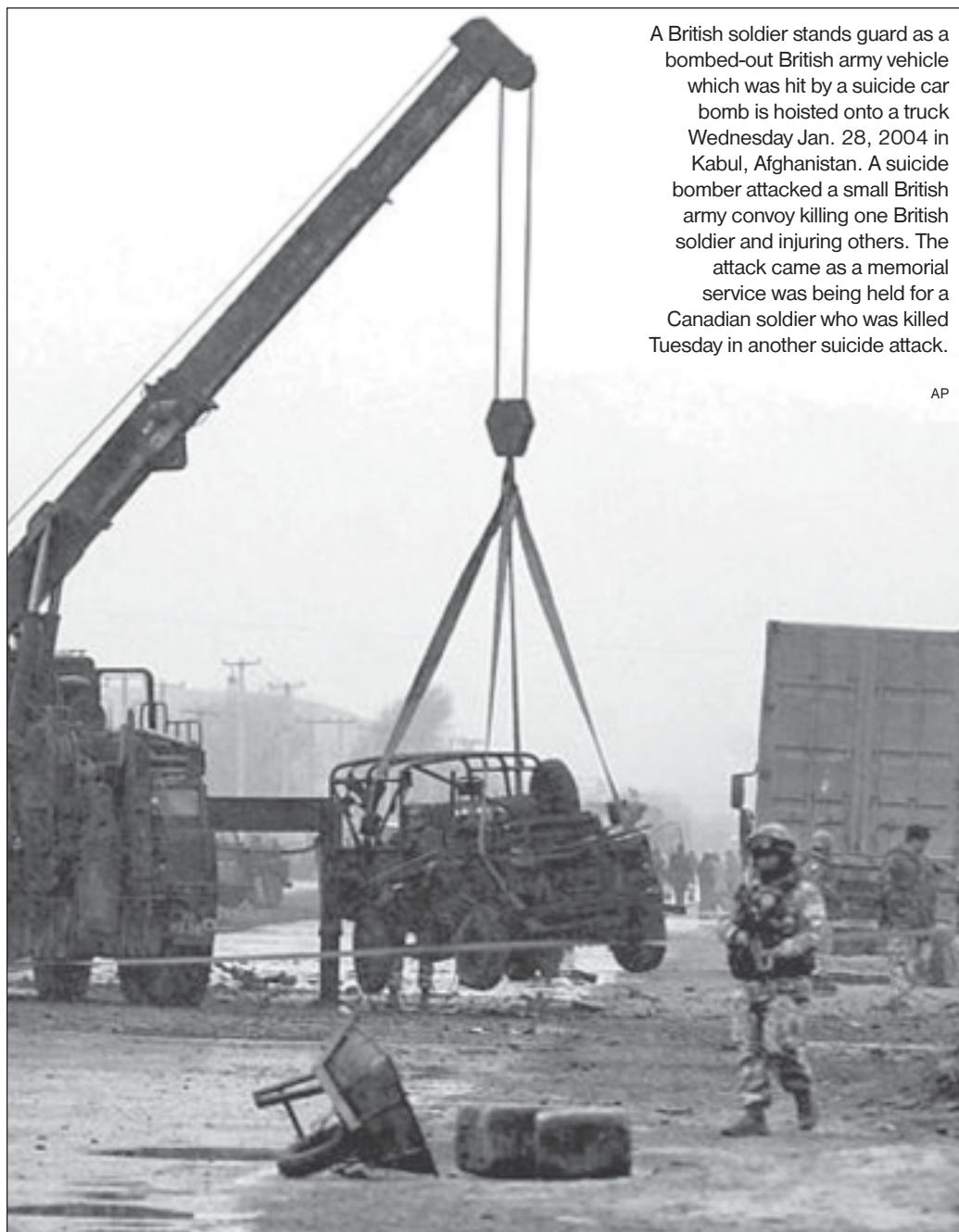
There were also to be research deals, including an accord with French jet engine maker Snecma, a nuclear fusion

project with France's Atomic Energy Commission and plans for joint work on disease epidemics with the Paris-based Pasteur Institute.

"French businesses are generally of a high technological level, while Chinese enterprises are manufacturers," said French Commerce Minister Francois Loos. "They complement each other naturally and that's what we have to exploit."

Critics of China's policies on Tibet and its human rights record have protested during Hu's visit. Scores of lawmakers boycotted Hu's address Tuesday to parliament. Only about 240 of the 577 lawmakers attended.

MELL
CMYK



A British soldier stands guard as a bombed-out British army vehicle which was hit by a suicide car bomb is hoisted onto a truck Wednesday Jan. 28, 2004 in Kabul, Afghanistan. A suicide bomber attacked a small British army convoy killing one British soldier and injuring others. The attack came as a memorial service was being held for a Canadian soldier who was killed Tuesday in another suicide attack.

AP

Afghan suicide bomber kills one British soldier

By STEPHEN GRAHAM
AP WRITER

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP)—A suicide car bomber blew himself up in a taxi next to British peacekeepers patrolling the Afghan capital Wednesday, killing one soldier and wounding four.

It was the second suicide assault on foreign troops in as many days, marking an escalation in the Taliban-led rebellion—and increasing its parallels with the insurgency in Iraq. In response, U.S. forces in Afghanistan are planning a spring offensive, Pentagon officials said Wednesday.

The British soldier died after a yellow and white taxi carrying 200 pounds of explosives blew up near his open-topped Land Rover at about 11 a.m. in the eastern outskirts of Kabul, said Nayamatullah Jalili, intelligence chief at the Interior Ministry. He said an Afghan was also killed—apparently the assailant.

“The preliminary investigation suggests it was a suicide attack,” Jalili said.

Four other British soldiers were wounded, two of them seriously, Col. Mike Griffiths, commander of the 300-strong British contingent in the NATO-

led peacekeeping force, said at a news conference in its fortified headquarters. He declined to identify any of the British soldiers or their unit.

An Afghan translator also was wounded.

“These attacks will strengthen our resolve to fight terrorism and free our peace-loving country from its effect,” President Hamid Karzai said in praising troops for helping secure the capital.

The bomb exploded as a somber ceremony was under way in Kabul to honor the Canadian soldier killed by a bomber Tuesday. A Taliban spokesman claimed the Islamic militant group was behind both attacks, declaring the start of a nationwide campaign of suicide bombings.

International troops and Afghan security forces closed off the scene of Wednesday’s bombing on a busy road near the main British and German peacekeeping barracks.

German military trucks with machine-guns barred traffic, while British Gurkhas—troops from Nepal—stood guard among shipping containers used as storefronts along the road.

Soldiers and investigators swarmed the Land Rover, its

front ripped open and badly charred. There was little left of the attacker’s car, which British military spokesman Capt. Tom Smith said exploded as the Land Rover was passing.

“There was an axle with a wheel and a lot of twisted metal,” Smith said.

The blast blew out the windows of a nearby bathhouse, sending people scurrying from the showers, said Zulgai, 20, a worker there who uses only one name.

Mullah Hakim Latifi, who claims to speak for the Taliban, said one of its members carried out the attack, at first intended for the base of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force.

“His target was the ISAF base. But he saw British troops so he exploded the car there,” he told The Associated Press by telephone. “We are compelled to attack the foreigners to defend our country, religion and honor.”

His claim couldn’t be independently verified.

Latifi also claimed Taliban responsibility for Tuesday’s attack on the Canadian patrol, which killed one Canadian and wounded three Canadian troops and eight civilians, including a Frenchman.

CPJA



Soldiers at Camp Julien prepare to transport the body of Cpl. Jamie Murphy Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2004. Murphy died when a suicide bomber targeted a Canadian patrol near Kabul Tuesday.

Pentagon plans Afghan spring offensive

By PAULINE JELINEK
AP WRITER

WASHINGTON (AP)—The Pentagon is planning a new offensive in the 2-year-old Afghanistan campaign to stop remnants of the Taliban regime and the al-Qaida terror network, officials said Wednesday, even as a second suicide assault on foreign troops in Kabul in as many days killed one British soldier and injured four.

The attack on international peacekeepers in Kabul, the Afghan capital, drew new attention to a worsening security situation in a country where American and other Western troops have been stationed since the fall of the Taliban's leadership in early 2002.

Rebels' use of roadside explosives and car bombs in the recent wave of attacks has led to new comparisons with the insurgency in Iraq.

At the Pentagon, orders have been

issued to prepare equipment and supplies for the coming offensive, although the operation will not necessarily require additional troops in the region, a defense official said on condition of anonymity. The upcoming operation, first reported by the Chicago Tribune, has been dubbed the "spring offensive."

Another Pentagon official declined to discuss the possibility that troops would extend operations to the Pakistan side of the border, where al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and top lieutenants have long been said to be hiding. But the official said that might have to be the next step.

Defense Department officials believe current operations in Afghanistan are not having the effect they want on the terrorist network and they are determined to do more, the official said.

Officials already have said they

hope to finally capture bin Laden this year, a development that could benefit President Bush in the November election. About 11,000 U.S. troops are in the region.

One senior defense official said Pentagon leaders determined a couple of months ago that it is important to catch bin Laden, more for the symbolism than for his military value.

"I can say that Osama bin Laden and (and former Taliban leader) Mullah Omar represent a threat to the world, and they need to be destroyed, and we believe we will catch them in the next year," Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty, a spokesman for military forces in the region, told CNN.

The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. David W. Barno, said last month that hundreds of al-Qaida fighters still appear to be active in Khost and neighboring provinces on the long Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

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Group wants China to free 54 dissidents

BEIJING (AP)—Amnesty International called Wednesday for the release of 54 people jailed in China for expressing opinions on the Internet, citing a "dramatic rise" in the number detained for anything from political speech to spreading news about SARS.

In a report released Wednesday, the London-based group said the 54 cases it had documented represented a significant increase from the 33 people listed in its November 2002 report.

Amnesty said the 54 cases were likely just "a fraction" of the actual number of people detained for opinions expressed online.

"China is said to have in place the most extensive censorship of the Internet of any country in the world," Amnesty said.

The organization said the prisoners included people who signed online petitions for government reform, published non-official news about SARS, communicated with dissident groups overseas, or called

for a review of Beijing's bloody 1989 crackdown on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Detainees also include followers of the banned spiritual group Falun Gong, it said.

China's Foreign Ministry could not immediately be reached for comment early Wednesday. In the past, it has denounced Amnesty's claims as biased and baseless.

Amnesty said the number of people detained for sharing information about severe acute respiratory syndrome was especially hard to determine.

The Chinese government was criticized for keeping last year's SARS outbreak under wraps in its initial weeks, and many in China resorted to sharing rumors about the disease by e-mail, online bulletin boards and mobile-phone text messages.

While China eventually allowed more reporting on SARS, Amnesty renewed its call for Beijing to ensure the media can report freely on the disease in the event of another large outbreak.

Japan passes bill on N. Korea sanctions

TOKYO (AP)—Japan's lower house passed a bill Thursday to make it easier to impose economic sanctions on North Korea, a step aimed at pressuring Pyongyang to hand over relatives of Japanese abducted decades ago.

Backed by both the ruling and main opposition parties, the legislation passed easily with a majority of lawmakers standing in show of support. There was no official tally of the vote.

The bill does not mention North Korea, but lawmakers say it is aimed at the reclusive state.

Officials in Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's government also have said they don't have any plans to impose sanctions, but the government is trying to build pressure

on North Korea to agree to talks on the abductions.

"Economic sanctions are one tool of diplomacy," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda said before the bill was passed. "It would be beneficial to have such a tool for policymaking."

The bill will go to the upper house for consideration next week.

The legislation would enable Japan to take measures including banning imports of North Korean goods and freezing remittances from North Koreans living in Japan. The money is badly needed by the isolated country's devastated economy.

Ahead of the Thursday vote, North Korea warned the bill would exacerbate tensions in the region.

verizon

World

Italian premier
admits plastic
surgery

ROME (AP)—Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi acknowledged Wednesday that he recently had cosmetic surgery—but said it was only under his eyes.

The billionaire premier dropped out of public view for nearly a month beginning at the end of December, prompting speculation he might be ill. A doctor first said Berlusconi had a touchup around his eyes, but then denied he knew anything about it.

Chatting at a reception Wednesday for Italian designers during high fashion week in Rome, Berlusconi acknowledged having cosmetic surgery, but quickly added it was “only under the eyes.”

The admission comes days after the left-leaning *L'Espresso* reported that Berlusconi underwent extensive plastic surgery on his face and neck. The newsweekly said the operation took place in a Swiss clinic in late December and was led by a top California surgeon. Berlusconi's convalescence was complicated by swelling around one of his eyes, the magazine said.

The premier's office declined to comment on the reports.

Army may keep forces in Iraq through '06

By ROBERT BURNS
AP MILITARY WRITER

WASHINGTON (AP)—The Army's top general said Wednesday he is making plans based on the possibility that the Army will be required to keep tens of thousands of soldiers in Iraq through 2006.

Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, the Army chief of staff, told the House Armed Services Committee that “for planning purposes”, he has ordered his staff to consider how the Army would replace the force that is now rotating into Iraq with another force of similar size in 2005—and again in 2006.

Stretched by commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, South Korea and the Balkans, the Army has used emergency authority to go beyond the limit set by Congress on the number of soldiers who can be in uniform, Schoomaker said.

He said the Army now is about 11,000 soldiers above the 482,400 limit and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has authorized the service to temporarily exceed the limit by as much as 30,000.

The decision about when to



New Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker testifies on Capitol Hill Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2004, before the House Armed Services Committee hearing on military preparedness.

end the U.S. military presence in Iraq will be made by President Bush and his national security aides, in consultation with American commanders in Iraq. As a service chief, Schoomaker's role is to ensure that soldiers are trained and equipped for any mission the president requires.

Of the 105,000 troops going to Iraq this winter and spring to replace

the 130,000 who have been there since the start of the war, about 80,000 are Army soldiers. The replacement force, which includes 25,000 Marines, is scheduled to spend a full year in Iraq.

Army officials have said that planning for the 2005 rotation of forces into Iraq will begin in February.

Schoomaker said he was

opposed to Congress passing legislation to permanently expand the size of the Army, mainly because it would be too costly.

“I'm adamant that that is not the way to go,” the Army chief said.

Even while the Iraq war continues, the Pentagon is planning a new offensive in the two-year-old Afghanistan

campaign to try to stop remnants of the Taliban regime and the al-Qaida terrorist network, officials said Wednesday.

Orders have been issued to prepare equipment and supplies, though the operation will not necessarily require additional troops in the region, where about 11,000 Americans are still deployed, a defense official said on condition of anonymity.

Schoomaker said the Army is enjoying success in recruiting new soldiers.

“There are more people lining up to come in than we've ever had, and the quality of those people is higher than it's ever been, and there's no indication right now that that's not going to continue,” he said.

Members of the House panel expressed surprise that Rumsfeld had agreed that the Army needed as many as 30,000 more soldiers, since he has publicly opposed a legislative move to expand the service.

Rep. Ellen O. Tauscher, D-Calif., said it sounded as if Rumsfeld was accomplishing through the use of his own executive powers the troop increase that he had resisted on Capitol Hill.

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World

Bush administration vows to keep schedule on Iraq self-rule

By BARRY SCHWEID
AP DIPLOMATIC WRITER

WASHINGTON (AP)—The Bush administration is sticking to its timetable for Iraq self-rule by July 1, but U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Wednesday that deadline might have to be reconsidered to forge an agreement on a provisional government.

Asserting “the U.N. has a role to play in Iraq,” Annan said he would send a mission as soon as its safety could be assured, but was not ready to re-establish a U.N. headquarters in Baghdad.

Two suicide bombings prompted Annan to withdraw U.N. diplomats in October. “We are not going to go back permanently now,” Annan said in New York.

The administration is looking to the United Nations to talk to a wide range of Iraqi leaders about the planned transition from U.S. occupation to Iraqi sovereignty. But the United States does not want to postpone the July 1 deadline or hold the direct elections of an interim assembly demanded by Shiite clerics.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the administration and some U.N. experts remain convinced that elections could not be held before July 1, when the U.S. occupation is due to end.

“But we are willing to listen to ideas when the U.N. team comes back to see what they might say,” Boucher said.

The administration had kept the United Nations at arms-length before and during the U.S.-led war last year that ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

But in order to give its postwar planning what one U.S. official called “more credibility,” the administration invited Annan to assist in planning transition and a constitutional democracy in Iraq.

That, in turn, has produced some different shadings in view.

Annan, who conferred Tuesday with President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington, said in New York that both U.S. administrators and the Iraqi Governing Council considered July 1 a firm deadline when they drafted transition plans last November.

Russian pullout from Georgia possible

By JUDITH INGRAM
AP WRITER

MOSCOW (AP)—Russia could pull its 8,000-strong military out of Georgia within five years, a senior military official said Wednesday, signaling an acceleration from previous estimates that the withdrawal would take a decade or more.

But that five-year estimate still is too long for Georgia, which wants the two remaining Soviet-era bases to be closed within three years. Russia said the Georgian demand is unrealistic.

A high-ranking Russian military official said on condition of anonymity Wednesday that once a withdrawal treaty was signed and ratified, the pullout would take a minimum of four to five years.

That period would be used to build housing in Russia for the approximately 8,000 officers and warrant officers he said would be affected.

However, analysts have said that only a couple hundred servicemen at the bases are Russian officers and the rest are hired locally. Russia also has about 150 tanks, 240 armored vehicles and 140 artillery pieces on the bases, according to the Interfax news agency.

The Russian official said the pullout would cost hundreds of

millions of dollars, and Georgia—a former Soviet republic—would have to pay the bill.

Earlier this week, Col.-Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky, the first deputy chief of the General Staff of the Russian armed forces, said the pullout could take seven to nine years. Military representatives previously said it would take 11 years.

Newly elected Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has pushed for the withdrawal, but at the same time is pursuing good relations with his larger neighbor, which Georgia depends on for its energy supplies.

The United States and the European Union have also pressed Russia to hold talks with Georgia about removing the troops. Secretary of State Colin Powell assured Moscow during his visit here last week that Washington had no plans to open a military base in Georgia.

The United States already has up to 100 military trainers there.

The mountainous Georgia considered strategically important for both Russia and Washington. It sits astride a planned oil pipeline between the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea that will bring crude to Western markets, and it also borders Chechnya, where Russia has been battling separatists for more than four years.

trib tony

quality tony

Milosevic's party flexes political muscle

By ALEKSANDAR VASOVIC
AP WRITER

BELGRADE, Serbia-Montenegro (AP)—Bouncing back from obscurity, Slobodan Milosevic's party positioned itself Wednesday as the kingmaker of Serbian politics, signaling it would support three other parties trying to form a government—if they agree to stop extraditing war crimes suspects to the U.N. tribunal.

If those Socialist terms are

accepted, Serbia could well lose key Western political and financial support and slide back toward the poverty-ridden isolation it suffered under Milosevic, who is being tried by the tribunal for war crimes stemming from his Balkan war campaigns in the 1990s.

The Socialists faded into virtual insignificance more than three years ago after their defeat at the polls forced Milosevic, their leader, to cede power after 13 years. The pro-democracy

coalition that replaced them extradited Milosevic to the Netherlands-based war crimes tribunal.

The Socialists are still weak, controlling only 22 seats in the 250-seat parliament. But they have been catapulted into a kingmaker role by bickering among pro-democracy parties that prevented them from forming a majority government after last year's elections.

Those elections failed to produce a clear winner.

Demonstrating their clout, the Socialists voted Wednesday with the three parties trying to form a minority government in electing a new speaker of parliament—Dragan Marsicanin, 54, of the conservative Democratic Party of Serbia.

Before the vote, top Socialist official Ivica Dacic said his party's backing of Marsicanin—and the new government—hinged on the demand that no more Serb suspects be extradited to the tribunal in The

Hague, Netherlands.

Vojislav Kostunica, who heads the Democratic Party of Serbia, also opposes such extradition because he considers the U.N. court anti-Serb.

Kostunica is widely predicted to be Serbia's next prime minister. There was no word on whether his party and its likely coalition partners accepted the Socialists' terms.

The Democratic Party, which recently dropped out of talks with three other reformist

groups, bitterly opposed any pact with the Socialists.

"What happened today opens the door for the Socialists to return to legislative power," said Boris Tadic, a leader of the Democrats.

Several key Milosevic associates also were extradited to the U.N. tribunal by the government that succeeded him. But more associates sought by the court remain free, including senior military and police commanders.

Insurgent group claims Iraq bombings

BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP)—An Iraqi insurgent group claimed responsibility Wednesday for twin suicide attacks on the offices of two Kurdish political parties, saying they were targeted because of the Kurds' ties to the United States.

"Two of our martyrdom-seeking brothers...broke into two dens of the devils in the city of Irbil in the north of Iraq," said the statement by "Jaish Ansar al-Sunna", or "Army of the Protectors of the Sunna."

Sunna refers to the collective teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The statement was posted in Arabic on a Web site that frequently carries statements by Islamic militants. It said the

Sunday attacks were launched because the two Kurdish parties "paved the way for the American crusader army."

The claim could not be independently confirmed. The name of the organization was included among a dozen insurgent groups that issued a joint statement this week in Ramadi and Fallujah warning Iraqis against cooperating with the U.S.-led occupation.

Kurdish and U.S. officials suspect the attacks may have been carried out by Ansar al-Islam, an extremist group with alleged ties to al-Qaida. The attacks killed many officials of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

In the statement, the Army of the Protectors of the Sunna condemned the PUK for the crackdown on Ansar al-Islam. It said PUK leader Jalal Talabani "was coordinating with the crusaders (Americans) to attack our mujahedeen brothers from Ansar al-Islam group and their women and children."

The statement said U.S. and Kurdish forces "pummeled them with tens of U.S. rockets, shelled them with aircraft and for eight days, nonstop, whole villages with their mosques were obliterated from the face of the Earth."

The statement was signed by Abu Abdullah al-Hassan bin Mahmoud, identified as the leader of Jaish Ansar al-Sunna.



AP
US Army Sgt. John Rhodes of the Charlie Company 1-6 Infantry 1st Armored Division and from Houston, Texas, frisks an Iraqi commuter at a mobile checkpoint set up along a Baghdad street Wednesday, Feb. 4, 2004 in Iraq.

western sales tony

Arafat aide accuses US of 'blackmail'

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP)—The United States is using political and financial "blackmail" to pressure the Palestinians to arrest those behind the deadly bombing of an American diplomatic convoy in the Gaza Strip, a top adviser to Yasser Arafat said Wednesday.

Jibril Rajoub, a senior security adviser to the Palestinian leader, said Washington has threatened to disengage from peacemaking and stop U.S. aid to the Palestinians, and has pressured other nations to withhold funding, unless those responsible for the Oct. 15 roadside blast are found.

The bomb ripped apart a diplomatic car in the Gaza Strip, killing three American security guards.

"You know that the Americans stopped their involvement (in funding and in the peace process) waiting for the results of the investigation," Rajoub told foreign reporters. "I think that this is blackmail."

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Wednesday "comments like that are ridiculous."

He said everybody should take seriously the blast that killed three Americans and the Palestinians should improve their security.

Ex-PM urges ban on Muslim headwear

By ELAINE GANLEY
AP WRITER

PARIS (AP)—Former Prime Minister Alain Juppe on Wednesday urged a "massive vote" of approval for a bill that would ban Islamic head scarves in public schools, as Muslims opposed to the measure protested outside the National Assembly.

Women in head scarves and other opponents marched to protest the "law on secularism"—a move seen by supporters as key to maintaining France's cherished separation of church and state.

A woman draped from head to toe in a French flag held a sign reading: "I do what I want with my hair," while one of the rally organizers warned the bill

would divide France into two camps: "Them and us."

Speaking on the second day of debate on the bill, Juppe told legislators the proposed ban is neither a "law of hostility" nor a "law to combat Islam."

"It's not about banning the head scarf in French society. It's about re-establishing spaces of neutrality and peace" in public schools, Juppe said.

A record number of legislators—144—were to address the National Assembly on the bill, which is expected to be passed next week. It would enter into force with the new school year in September.

Juppe, mayor of Bordeaux and head of President Jacques Chirac's governing party, said strong backing would be in



Raffarin

France's interest.

"If our vote is massive it will, without any doubt, be the best signal of cohesion and republican determination that we can give," he said.

Opponents—especially some Muslim groups—say the measure does not address the real issue: the failure to integrate France's large Muslim population into the mainstream. Some contend a ban would fuel extremism and force Muslim girls to leave school rather than take off their head coverings.

Prime Minister Jean-Pierre

Raffarin, opening the parliamentary debate Tuesday, made a forceful plea in favor of a ban on "conspicuous" religious symbols and apparel in public schools. The legislation also would ban Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses.

Several hundred people, Muslims and non-Muslims, rallied Wednesday behind the National Assembly to protest the bill.

France has Western Europe's largest Muslim population—some 5 million—and Islam is the second religion in the mainly Roman Catholic country.

Spain security chief wounded in Iraq dies

MADRID, Spain (AP)—A Spanish military adviser who fell into a coma after being seriously wounded in a shootout in Iraq last month died Wednesday, the Defense Ministry said.

Civil Guard commander Gonzalo Perez Garcia's death brought to 11 the number of Spaniards who have been killed in Iraq since last August.

Perez Garcia was shot in the head on Jan. 22 after the pre-dawn raid of a suspected terrorist hideout in southern Iraq.

He fell into a coma and was flown back to Spain on Jan. 23. He died in a Madrid military hospital shortly before 9 p.m. Wednesday, the ministry said.

Although not a member of the armed forces, Perez Garcia, 42, was a security adviser for the 1,300 Spanish troops in Iraq. He was married and had three daughters.

Last month's shootout occurred in the town of Hamsa, about 25 miles south of Diwaniyah, where the Spanish troops are based.

King Juan Carlos sent a telegram of condolence to the family and the Civil Guard upon hearing the news, the national news agency Efe said.

Spain's conservative Popular Party government was one of the strongest supporters of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq despite massive public opposition.

Russia plans chem weapons disposal plants

MOSCOW (AP)—All of Russia's facilities for disposing of the world's biggest chemical weapons stockpile should be ready for operation by the end of 2006, officials said Wednesday.

Viktor Kholtsov, general director of the Russian Agency on Ammunition, told Interfax two large-scale plants in the provinces of Udmurtia and Kurgan are planned to be built in 2005. The first such facility, in the Saratov region, started its work in 2002.

The Saratov and Udmurtia plants are intended to carry out a two-stage disposal of Lewisite, while the Kurgan

facility will do away with sarine, soman and VX, agency spokesman Dmitry Timashkov told The Associated Press.

Three smaller plants are to be erected in Kirov, Bryansk and Penza in 2006, Kholtsov said, according to Interfax. The plants will dispose of the same chemicals in a single detoxification stage, making them non-military reagents, Timashkov said.

In 1997, Russia committed itself to destroying its stockpile of 44,000 tons of chemical weapons within 10 years. However, in 2001 the government changed its target date to 2012 because of a lack of funds.

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Death toll reaches 27 in Turkey collapse

Sharon defends plan to evacuate Gaza

JERUSALEM (AP)—Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Wednesday defended his plan to dismantle virtually all Jewish settlements in Gaza, and there were new signs the proposal threatened the stability of his government.

Ten lawmakers from the ruling Likud Party sent a letter to Sharon threatening to abandon the prime minister if he moves forward with his plans without their consent.

"We announce beforehand that it will be very difficult for us to support this plan without the approval of the Likud institutions on this sensitive subject," the lawmakers wrote. They added that they would not support the entry of the opposition Labor Party into the government.

A senior official said Sharon would put his unilateral disengagement plan—including removing some settlements and imposing a boundary on the West Bank if peace talks fail—before a national referendum, as demanded by Likud lawmakers.

Sharon welcomes a referendum because the issue cuts across ideological lines and "has overwhelming support among the public," the

official said on condition of anonymity.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher offered tacit U.S. approval.

"It's important that we start to make progress in resolving this issue and removing it as a difficulty between the two parties, setting up a situation where Israelis and Palestinians can both have stable lives," he said.

"Action on settlements, action to remove settlements as a source of tension and a source of difficulty is good," he said.

"They move us down the road," Boucher said.

But the U.S. official said, "we've always been concerned about any steps that could attempt to unilaterally end the process or unilaterally impose a settlement."

In New York, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan gave strong backing Wednesday to Sharon's settlement plan, saying it could provide new momentum for Mideast peace.

"The withdrawal from Gaza that has been announced by the prime minister—if it does take place—can really give us a very important moment, a new dynamic that can propel the process forward," Annan said.

KONYA, Turkey (AP)—Police detained two contractors Wednesday following the collapse of an apartment building that killed at least 27 people and left dozens missing. Rescuers said hopes were fading of finding more survivors.

Authorities said 31 survivors had been pulled out of the rubble since the sudden collapse of the 11-story apartment building on Monday evening.

Between 40 and 100 people were believed inside when the building crumbled, officials said. Rescue teams were working around the clock but acknowledged that chances of finding more survivors were slim.

The last survivor was

rescued Tuesday evening, almost 20 hours after the building's collapse.

Top officials, including the prime minister, blamed shoddy construction for the disaster and police were investigating whether the contractors ignored building codes.

Police detained two of the building's contractors, Konya Gov. Ahmet Kayhan said. The Anatolia news agency reported that police were searching for a third. It wasn't clear what charges, if any, they could face.

Angry relatives at the site demanded punishment for the contractors.

Poor construction "led to the death of lots of people," said

Abdulbaki Aycicek, who was waiting for news about eight missing family members, including his pregnant sister-in-law.

Officials at the scene said 27 bodies had been found and the death toll was expected to rise with dozens of people still missing. Several rescue teams began leaving the site as bulldozers and cranes were used to comb through the wreckage.

Mustafa Aycan fought back tears as he sat on a wooden plank from the debris as four members of his family who lived on the second floor of the building were missing.

"I'm hoping that that they're in a crevice inside the building. That's our only hope," he said

as he and others huddled around a fire to keep warm.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan blamed the collapse on poor construction and called for tougher building codes.

"This is entirely a technical failure. As long as the sanctions for these type of things aren't heavy, citizens will pay the price with their life," Erdogan said Tuesday. "Nobody has that right. We won't allow it."

Poor construction also was blamed for many of the 17,000 deaths in a 1999 earthquake and for the collapse in May of a dormitory in eastern Turkey during a magnitude 6.4 earthquake, which killed 84 students.

US: Iraq attacks aimed at sabotage

TIKRIT, Iraq (AP)—A senior U.S. commander said Wednesday that recent attacks in Iraq are the work of groups seeking to sabotage—or gain leverage in—a future independent Iraqi government that is due to take power by July.

Maj. Gen. Raymond Odierno, commander of the Army's 4th Infantry Division, also predicted that coalition forces would be able to crush the insurgency within a year, despite continued American losses since the Dec. 13 capture of Saddam Hussein.

"There are ethnic issues. People are now positioning themselves to see what their role is in the next government, and they are doing it by force," Odierno said after a tour of this city, Saddam's hometown. "They are trying to disrupt the way things are going so they can get a little advantage."

On Wednesday, an Iraqi insurgent group claimed responsibility for twin bombings that killed 109 people at the offices of two Kurdish political parties on Sunday. The "Jaish Ansar al-Sunna" said it targeted the "dens of the devils" because of the parties' ties to the United States.

The U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority plans to hand over sovereignty to a provisional Iraqi government on June 30. The United Nations soon will dispatch a team to Iraq to resolve differences between the Americans and the Shiite Muslim clergy over how to choose the new Iraqi leadership.

"We have six to 12 months left of this insurgency," Odierno said. "I think constant pressure will bring it down."

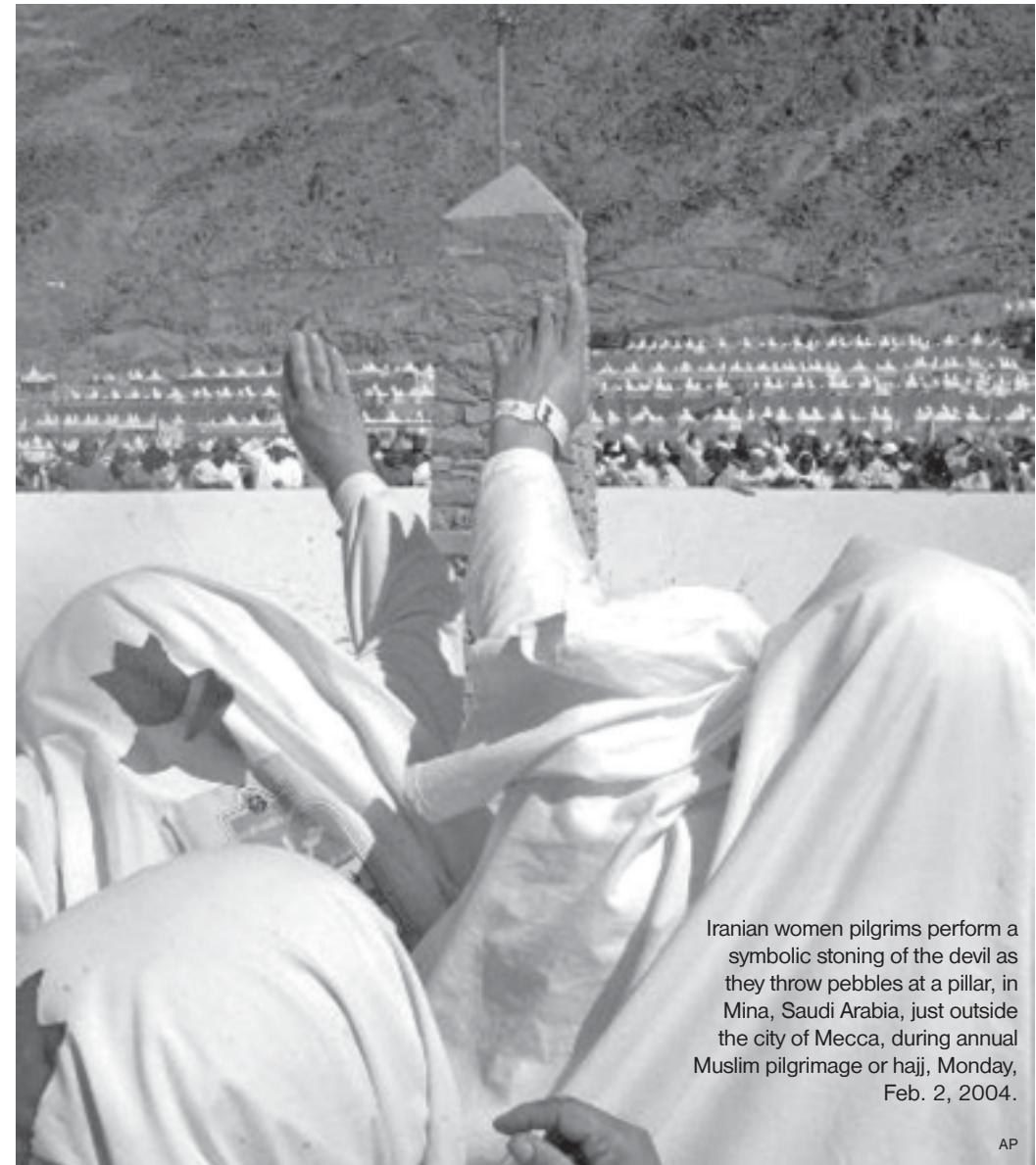
So far, 528 U.S. service members have died since the Iraq war began March 20, including 368 by hostile fire. Forty-five soldiers died in January and three more in the first three days of February. The January toll was five more than in December, despite hopes that Saddam's capture would weaken the insurgency and slow the killings from roadside bombs and other attacks.

Odierno, who is in charge of security over a large swath of north-central Iraq, did not elaborate on how insurgent attacks were aimed at gaining advantage before the power transfer. He also did not offer specific examples of such attacks.

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Iranian women pilgrims perform a symbolic stoning of the devil as they throw pebbles at a pillar, in Mina, Saudi Arabia, just outside the city of Mecca, during annual Muslim pilgrimage or hajj, Monday, Feb. 2, 2004.

AP

Muslim faithful end hajj pilgrimage

MECCA, Saudi Arabia (AP)—Carrying suitcases bulging with souvenirs from Islam's holiest cities, pilgrims began the journey home from a hajj that was marred by a deadly stampede in which 251 worshippers were killed.

For Iraqis, perhaps extra prayers were offered to avoid bureaucratic tangles like those that delayed their arrival at the annual pilgrimage, a once-in-a-lifetime requirement for Muslims who can make the trip. The main events of the pilgrimage ended Wednesday.

"I am so concerned about the trip back home. We had to go through a lot to reach here," said Abdul Baset al-Sameraie, an accountant from Baghdad whose 900-mile trip to Saudi Arabia took nearly five days.

For security reasons, Iraq's international airports have remained closed to most commercial flights. Traveling over land, many of the 30,000 Iraqi pilgrims were stranded at the Kuwaiti border for days because of a bureaucratic holdup.

Kuwait blamed Iraq for the delays, saying Iraqi hajj organizers had delayed providing

flight schedules and took pilgrims to Kuwait before their Saudi visas had been issued.

In spite of the hassles, most were simply grateful at having completed the hajj.

For Mohammed Sarkhan, 63, what mattered most was performing the rituals after "being rid of Saddam." Saddam's government permitted only those aged 60 and older to perform the hajj to prevent defections and contacts with dissidents.

"For 35 years, we have been living in utter humiliation under this tyrant," Sarkhan said. "The first thing I did when I arrived in Mecca was to thank God that Saddam and his entourage were gone."

The last thing tens of thousands of pilgrims, including al-Sameraie, were doing before leaving the holy cities was shopping for souvenirs and gifts for family and friends.

Like others, his bags were weighed down with prayer beads and miniatures of the Kaaba, the holy stone cube in Mecca. Small shops in Mecca buzzed with bargainers.

"Give him 10 more euros and let us leave, it is just a pair

of earrings," Fatma Belaziz, a French pilgrim of Algerian origin told a friend. "We have so many other souvenirs we want to buy from here to remember this wonderful journey."

But the feeling of spiritual cleansing stood above, among many of the faithful, even the drive for souvenirs.

"I have been cleansed," said Maha Hassan, "thank God, thank God." A Syrian woman in her late 60s, she was catching her breath after walking around the Kaaba, the holy black stone cube in the center of Mecca's Grand Mosque. The walk is the last ritual of the pilgrimage.

It is the climax of the pilgrimage after the three-day ritual of throwing stones at pillars, symbolizing the devil, in nearby Mina.

It was there that the 251 pilgrims died in a stampede in the deadliest hajj disaster since 1997, when 340 pilgrims died in a fire at the tent city at Mina. Pilgrims also were trampled to death on their way to the stoning ritual in 1994, 1998, 2001 and 2003.

Saudi authorities have promised changes to prevent future deaths.

Blair defends Iraq war despite protests

LONDON (AP)—Prime Minister Tony Blair, undaunted by critics but briefly silenced by shouting protesters in the House of Commons, said Wednesday he was proud of his decision to go to war in Iraq, even though weapons inspectors have found less than he expected.

While a new inquiry will

examine the prewar intelligence, Blair said only lawmakers and the British people can pass judgment on whether he was right to join the U.S.-led invasion.

"To attempt to subcontract this issue to some committee as to whether it was right or wrong to go to war is not merely wrong, ultimately, it is profoundly

undemocratic," he said.

At a Commons debate interrupted by heckling, Blair said inspection teams had turned up evidence showing Saddam Hussein's "total, unrepentant, malignant intent" and his violation of United Nations resolutions - enough to justify the U.S.-led invasion.

Science & Technology

Science & Technology

Science & Technology

Life & Style

Russian industrialist buys Faberge eggs



By ULA ILNYTZKY
AP WRITER

NEW YORK (AP)—A Russian industrialist privately purchased the Forbes collection of historic Faberge art pieces, including nine rare Imperial Easter Eggs, for an undisclosed sum and ahead of a scheduled auction.

The eggs, all commissioned by Russian czars in the late 1800s, and more than 180 other Faberge pieces were bought by Victor Vekselberg, Sotheby's said Wednesday.

Sotheby's had

estimated the entire collection at up to \$90 million. The Coronation Egg—the most valued piece—could fetch as much as \$24 million at auction, Sotheby's said.

The private sale negotiated by Sotheby's on behalf of the Forbes family "happened very quickly," said Diana Phillips, an auction house spokeswoman. She wouldn't disclose the purchase price but said: "It was a very serious offer that the Forbes family accepted." Sotheby's had planned to auction the items in April.

Carl Faberge, who created jewelry for European royalty in the 19th century, was commissioned by Czar Alexander III in 1885 to create an Easter gift for his wife, Czarina Marina Feodorovna. Nicholas II continued the tradition, and the collection grew.

The eggs, about 5 inches tall, are intricately designed and individually crafted. The Coronation Egg is made of gold enamel and contains a replica of the coach Czarina Alexandra rode into Moscow in 1897.

Only the Kremlin owns more Faberge Imperial eggs—at 10.

"The Faberge Egg collection,"

said Vekselberg, "represents perhaps the most significant example of our cultural heritage outside Russia. The religious, spiritual and emotional content captured by these Faberge eggs touches upon the soul of the Russian people."

Malcolm S. Forbes, the late publisher and editor of Forbes magazine, collected the eggs from the 1960s until his death in 1990. His family had said the auction would free it from the upkeep of the collection.

In a statement issued by Sotheby's, the family said it was "delighted that the advent of a new era in Russia has made possible the return of these extraordinary objects. It is an astonishingly romantic ending to one of the great stories in art history."

The eggs and other choice pieces from the collection, including stone carvings, gold cigarette cases and gem-studded picture frames, will be displayed at Sotheby's New York galleries—on a date to be announced later—before Vekselberg returns the collection to Russia.

Vekselberg is chairman of the board of directors of Renova, an investment and business development company. He was instrumental in forging a Russian-U.S. partnership that acquired the controlling rights to Tyumen Oil Company, now Russia's third largest oil and gas company.

A jeweled coach and the Coronation Egg which holds it, which were presented by Tsar Nicholas II to his wife the Czarina Alexandra, are shown in this undated file photo. The egg is one of the nine Faberge Imperial Easter Eggs sold by the Forbes family to Russian industrialist Victor Vekselberg, Sotheby's announced on Wednesday.

AP

crm

crm meet

Grisham returns with 'Last Juror'

By ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY
AP WRITER

NEW YORK (AP)—Year after year, for more than a decade, John Grisham has been writing best sellers that bring criticism from both readers and critics alike.

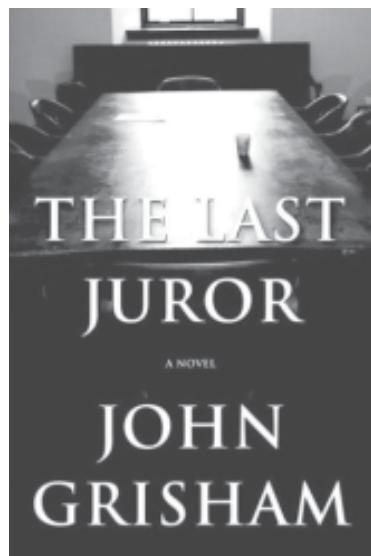
"The worst letters come from retired high school English teachers," Grisham said during an interview with The Associated Press to publicize his 17th book. "They will literally take a book and pick it to pieces and send me 14 pages of notes."

Despite those armchair editors—and some "really, really bad reviews" from critics—Grisham's aim is simply to make popular books that people love to read. And he has succeeded, with more than 100 million books in print in the United States alone.

The harsh reviews seem to be softening, though, with his new book, "The Last Juror," which The New York Times praised this week as "a reminder of how the Grisham juggernaut began."

Still, Grisham, who turns 49 on Sunday, tries not to pay much attention. "I've sold too many books to ever be taken seriously by critics," he said. "What I think about is making the best book I've ever written. That's my goal every time."

His latest novel is a return to the fictional town of Clanton, Miss., the setting of 1989's "A Time to Kill," his first book. "The Last Juror," set in the 1970s, follows Willie Traynor, a young reporter who buys a struggling newspaper and thinks it will be easy running a weekly in a sleepy town.



Clanton doesn't stay sleepy for long. Danny Padgett, a member of a wealthy family, is accused of brutally raping and murdering a woman in front of her two young children. The case is a slam-dunk—the victim's last words were, "It was Danny Padgett"—and the Ford County Times rivets the town with the trial's lurid details.

But when someone starts targeting those who convicted Padgett and a gunshot rips through a window about 20 feet above Willie's head, his career choice no longer seems so safe.

The book is sure to satisfy Grisham's millions of fans, with a host of colorful characters and a fast-moving courtroom drama. But it also has contemplative scenes about those turbulent years of school desegregation, the Vietnam War and their impact on an insular town.

"This story was always rattling around back there, always ready to be written," said Grisham, who enjoyed living vicariously through Willie, a long-haired smart aleck who spent his college days smoking pot and protesting the war.

Grisham was much more conservative back then. Even now, he's known as somewhat of a sober figure—there's no lascivious sex or particularly foul language in his books.

Even his attire—brown corduroy suit and blue tie—is modest, understated. He speaks with a slight drawl and is well-mannered and friendly, even though he'd rather be home in Virginia than talking to a reporter.

Born in Arkansas and raised throughout the South, Grisham was a small-town lawyer and state legislator in Southaven, Miss., when he decided in the early 1980s to wake at dawn every morning to write a novel about a racially charged rape and murder trial.

Published by a small press in 1989, "A Time to Kill" sold just 5,000 copies. Then came "The Firm," which sold 1 million copies in 1991 and made Grisham a star. Now, a standard first printing for a Grisham hardcover is an astronomical 2.8 million copies, according to Stephen Rubin, president of Doubleday, which publishes Grisham's books.



AP
Author John Grisham poses for a portrait at his publisher's office in New York, Feb. 3, 2004.

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Worker says Jackson rehearsal was tamer

NEW ORLEANS (AP)—Before the Super Bowl, Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson rehearsed a tamer version of the now-infamous breast-bearing performance during their halftime show, a worker who saw the rehearsals said Wednesday.

Timberlake practiced removing Jackson's jacket—not exposing her breast—in rehearsals several days before Sunday's game, said David Spear, who attended the rehearsals as a consultant for Pyrotechnico, the company hired by MTV to produce pyrotechnics during halftime.

Spear said Jackson was wearing a sweater and jeans during the rehearsal. Timberlake pantomimed removing a jacket, said Spear, who added that he assumed Jackson would be wearing both a jacket and a blouse underneath during Sunday's show.

Jackson has apologized repeatedly for what happened at the end of her performance Sunday: Timberlake snatched off part of her bustier on stage, revealing a breast clad in a "nipple shield" to about 89 million viewers.

"That's not how it was rehearsed," Spear said Wednesday. "It was clear that night that there was going to be one scene where he would remove her jacket. The clear assumption was that she would have something on underneath."

CBS faces a Federal Communications Commission investigation into whether the Super Bowl show violated decency laws, with potential fines of up to \$27,500. If applied to each CBS station, the fine could reach into the millions.

Spear, who lives in New Orleans, said MTV changed a number of elements of the

Janet Jackson is shown in a videotape released to the media Tuesday, Feb. 3, 2004, in Los Angeles in which she apologized for the breast-baring incident during her performance at the Super Bowl halftime show. Jackson had previously apologized Monday night in a written statement.

AP



Timberlake: Family offended by Super Bowl

LOS ANGELES (AP)—Justin Timberlake said Wednesday that his own family was offended by his racy Super Bowl halftime duet with Janet Jackson, but he insisted he thought only her bustier would be revealed when he pulled on her costume, not her breast.

Timberlake, in an interview with KCBS-TV outside the Staples Center, where he was rehearsing for Sunday's Grammy Awards, said he understood "how unfortunate this is."

"I do understand that there were a lot of people that were completely offended by what happened, including my own family. And I think that's probably the part that's

halftime show during rehearsals. Performer Kid Rock had tossed his U.S. flag T-shirt into the crowd during rehearsals, but was told to hand the shirt to a band member instead, Spear said.

He also said they changed camera angles to screen out a

frustrating the most for me and it's completely, completely, completely, regrettable," he told KCBS.

He also said he was frustrated that his character was being questioned.

Timberlake said that before the show he got a call from Jackson and her choreographer saying they wanted to do a "costume reveal."

"Now I was under the impression that what was going to be revealed ... was a red brassiere, bustier," he said.

He said he did not have time to rehearse the move before taking the stage, and was shocked at the outcome.

scantly clad dancer.

Tom Freston, chairman of MTV Networks, has said he welcomes the FCC's investigation, which he said will prove that the show's producers and broadcasters had no prior knowledge of the stunt. MTV

produced the halftime show.

Spear said he believed CBS and MTV were unaware that Jackson's breast would be exposed during the show.

"I think they got snookered," Spear said. "I think they got blindsided by her antics."

Oh, for the swift return of my buns-warming car

My car is in the body shop.

It was hit by a tree.

At least that's the story the person who was driving at the time is telling.

Fortunately, no one was injured.

Which is not to say there hasn't been some personal tragedy.

I have been forced, during all this frigid weather, to live without heated-leather seats.

If you have never experienced heated-leather seats, I doubt that you are feeling my pain.

If, however, you are familiar with the warm caress of hot leather on cold buns, there is a good chance you are weeping at this very moment.

But don't cry for me, Argentina.

As is often the case, a positive has arisen from this adversity - a can't-miss fashion opportunity.

Ready?

Heated-leather pants.

They're hot.

They're portable.

They're cheaper than a car.

I'm looking for investors, so if you're interested, have your people call my people.

Anyway, while I am waiting for my car to be repaired, I have been driving a rental.

I can't remember the make or model, but you see a lot of these cars outside restaurants where they serve dinner real early.

For the record, I did not request this car specifically.

All I said to the rental guy was that I wanted something full size with a trunk big enough to hold a half-dozen or so bodies. I was joking.

He didn't laugh.

I think that had something to do with his being from New Jersey.

Truth is, I've never liked rental cars.

For one thing, they're hard to get used to. I know this sounds weird, but the rental I'm in right now kind of floats.

It's not too bad during the day, when you can see the horizon, but at night, it makes you a little queasy.

The other thing I don't like about rentals is the ickiness factor.

Sitting in a rental is similar to sleeping in a hotel bed. You just can't stop wondering about who was there before you and what manner of unspeakable things they may have done.

Then there is the odor problem, which, no matter how many of those little Christmas trees they stuff under the seat, cannot be eliminated.

It's probably just my luck, but I always seem to get the car the guy with the terminal gastrointestinal problem turned in just before he was beamed up to that big Beano patch in the sky.

As you can well imagine, I'm dying to get my car back, but I'm not optimistic it will happen anytime soon.

Let's just say the damage estimate would make you whistle. And it keeps going up.

I just hope the tree was insured.



By JIM SHEA
The Hartford Courant

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NBC's 'ER' cuts shot of patient's breast

LOS ANGELES (AP)—Janet Jackson's revealing Super Bowl halftime moment has created fallout for "ER," with NBC removing a glimpse of an elderly patient's breast in Thursday's episode.

The network said Wednesday it had "unfortunately concluded that the atmosphere created by this week's events has made it too difficult for many of our affiliates to air this shot."

NBC's decision was criticized by John Wells, the executive producer of the popular and long-running medical drama, who said such "affiliate overreactions" have a "chilling effect" on dramatic integrity.

In a statement, Wells called the Jackson incident at last Sunday's Super Bowl "inappropriate and deplorable on a broadcast intended for viewers of all ages."

But "the incidental exposure of an elderly woman's breast in the context of a medical trauma is not comparable," he said.

Viewers advised of a show's adult content are capable of "making the distinction and adjusting their viewing habits accordingly," he said.

"This type of network behavior is one of the primary reasons that so many of today's producers and viewers are increasingly turning to HBO and other cable outlets that do not censor responsible storytelling," Wells said.

In its statement, NBC agreed that the scene, in which an 80-year-old woman receives emergency treatment, is "appropriate and in context" and noted it would have aired late in the evening, after 10:30 p.m. EST.

But the network said it couldn't ignore the furor that followed a musical number in which Justin Timberlake pulled off part of Jackson's costume, exposing her breast to 89 million viewers.

'Friends' not close to best comedy ever

By FRAZIER MOORE
AP TELEVISION WRITER

NEW YORK (AP)—As we all know, "Friends" is coming to an end this season after 10 years of being there for us.

We know, too, that filming wrapped last month, and that its finale will air in May with the accompanying hype of the Olympics and the Super Bowl combined.

And we know that, despite reruns of "Friends" airing daily on many local stations and on cable's TBS, we will be poorer for its absence from NBC Thursdays at 8 p.m. EST. As will be poor NBC, which could face deep trouble without this ratings blockbuster on the schedule next fall.

Even so, I have a modest proposal. I'd like to suggest that not only isn't "Friends" the "best comedy ever" (as NBC claimed before wisely recanting) ... it isn't even close.

Fastidiously crafted fluff, yes. A trusty laughter-delivery device, sure.

But "Friends" doesn't hold a candle to the sitcom greats, which range through TV history from the pioneering "I Love Lucy" and "The Honeymooners" to current classics like "Frasier" and "Everybody Loves Raymond."

To be fair, "Friends" broke new ground in one notable way. It defied the sitcom custom of one or more stars backed by a supporting cast. On "Friends," the six "friends" (like the actors who vaulted to superstardom playing them) have always been coequals.

Both on the screen and behind the scenes, "Friends" is all about maintaining a united front—"I'll be there for you," goes that icky song—with none of the characters more important or more lovable than any other.

In September 1994, when "Friends" premiered as an instant hit, such egalitarianism was unprecedented on a sitcom, and has seldom been tried since (one futile attempt: last fall's smutty "Friends" ripoff, "Coupling").

For good reason. It's hard to administer six characters in equal measure within a 22-minute narrative. Somehow



The cast of NBC's "Friends" appear in a scene in this undated publicity photo. Matt Le Blanc as Joey, left, Paul Rudd as Mike, Jennifer Aniston as Rachel, Lisa Kudrow as Phoebe, David Schwimmer as Ross, Matthew Perry as Chandler, and Courtney Cox Arquette as Monica. AP

"Friends" has managed this balancing act, week after week, maintaining equilibrium inside its private universe. But at a cost: serious inbreeding.

We all know the original concept for the series: Six attractive twenty-something singles congregated in a Greenwich Village apartment building anchored by a coffee bar too cutely named the Central Perk.

Monica (Courteney Cox Arquette) was a lovely control freak. Her brother was the marginally nerdy Ross (David Schwimmer), and Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) her cutie of a childhood friend. Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) was a New Agey folk singer, Joey (Matt LeBlanc) a happy-go-lucky dunce trying to make it as an actor, and Chandler (Matthew Perry) an accountant with a fine-tuned sense of irony.

Over the years, the friends have suffered the occasional setback. For instance, Ross has failed with marriage and Joey's career hasn't exactly taken off.

But "Friends" trades on the notion that any problem can be neutralized by the company we keep. The privilege of membership is satisfaction—that's the reassuring message "Friends" hands us.

Meanwhile, the friends are smothering in one another's embrace. Despite the best efforts of the actors who portray them, they are stuck in second gear (that song again!) as little more than broad-stroke variations on a theme.

In comedy no less than drama, the best characters have nagging flaws they must contend with. Where, then, are the demons on "Friends"? Monica slayed hers—teenage obesity—before the

series even began. Chandler, fond of cracking wise about his failure with women, nonetheless went on to woo and wed the delectable Monica. Go figure!

Throughout sitcom history, the best characters are forever reaching for a goal just beyond their grasp. Hawkeye Pierce wants to get home from Korea in one piece. Deputy Barney Fife wants to prove his valor as a lawman to the citizens of Mayberry. Mary Richards wants to show the world she can make it, after all.

But what of the tight little sextet of "Friends"? They just want to be loved by one another, and they are. They just want to hang out with their friends, and they do. So their mission was accomplished in the series' first week. After that? More and more icing on the cake.

cda rfp

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ret fund

Actress: Gibson's movie not anti-Semitic

ALISON MUTLER
AP WRITER

BUCHAREST, Romania

(AP)—The actress who plays Mary in Mel Gibson's passion-stirring biblical epic "The Passion of the Christ" says her parents were Holocaust survivors but she does not consider the film anti-Semitic.

If there is a message, it's more about how people can be manipulated by their leaders, Maia Morgenstern said Tuesday.

"Mel Gibson is an artist, a director. He never imposed his religious convictions on anyone," Morgenstern, who is Jewish, said in an interview with The Associated Press, rejecting criticism that the film will fuel anti-Semitism.

The film is to be released Ash Wednesday, Feb. 25. Gibson, who directed, co-wrote and financed the \$25 million film, has denied that his movie maligns Jews. However, it has drawn complaints from those who say it blames Jews for Christ's death.

"When people go and see the film, they will (primarily) see a work of art," Morgenstern said. Muslims, atheists, Christians and Jews worked on the film but race and religion were never an issue, said the 42-year-old actress.

Any political message the film offers is "about the responsibility and impact political and military leaders can have in manipulating the masses



Jim Caviezel, right, portraying Jesus Christ, speaks with an actress on the set of "The Passion of the Christ" in this Jan. 24, 2003 file photo. AP

and interfering in people's conscience, particularly at a moment of crisis as it was then," said Morgenstern.

"The Roman occupation was terrible and people were very poor. Pontius Pilate was very afraid that there could be a real revolution," she said, referring to the Roman governor of Judea who caved to the

pressures of a mob and allowed Jesus to be crucified.

Morgenstern, known both for her outstanding work in theater and film, is Romania's most renowned actress, but her popularity has been generally restricted to Europe.

She has starred in about 30 movies, the best known being "The Oak Tree," a Romanian

French production, and "Ulysses' Gaze," a Greek film.

Morgenstern, whose grandfather died in the Auschwitz death camp, spoke glowingly of Gibson, praising his professional abilities and the kindness he showed when her daughter became ill in Romania. Gibson sent her home to spend time with the child, and

then allowed the 3-year-old to join her on the set.

Gibson may be the star of international blockbusters like the "Lethal Weapon" series, but he is not yet a household name in Romania.

Morgenstern's mother visited her on location, excitedly telling friends that her daughter was filming with "Gib Melson."

Coppola celebrates 'Lost in Translation'

LOS ANGELES (AP)—By most accounts, it was even bigger than the premiere.

"Lost in Translation," which counts a best-picture bid among its four Oscar nominations, debuted on DVD Tuesday with a sushi and karaoke party reminiscent of the Tokyo bar where the lonely Americans Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson forged their semi-romantic friendship.

"The thing that was great for me was just to make the movie, to see it finished, and make the movie that I had in my mind. So all of this is great, but not at all what I'd have guessed," writer-director Sofia Coppola said.

Although Murray is in Italy at work on another movie, co-star Johansson and Coppola's filmmaking father, Francis Ford Coppola, who co-produced "Lost in Translation," attended the party at Los Angeles' Koi restaurant, alongside stars such as Quentin Tarantino, Marisa Tomei and Gary Busey.

"They used to call home video 'the back end,' but tonight this seems more like the front door, compared to our rinky-



Sofia Coppola, left, Francis Ford Coppola and Quentin Tarantino, right, celebrate at the DVD release party for "Lost in Translation" Tuesday, Feb. 3, 2004, at Koi Restaurant in Los Angeles. AP

dink premiere in New York," joked James Schamus, co-president of the movie's distributor, Focus Features.

Coppola's film debuted to critical acclaim in September, and slowly became a box-office hit that has held its own during

awards season against "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King."

Her father, an Oscar winner for "The Godfather: Part II" and a directing nominee for each film in the trilogy, said he had this advice for her during the Academy

Awards race: "Accept it all with a sense of honor and tradition."

Coppola, 32, made her feature-film directing debut in 1999 with "The Virgin Suicides." She is the first American woman to be nominated for a directing Oscar.

WALLACE

Hilton may host Miss USA pageant

NEW YORK (AP)—Despite being tall, leggy and glamorous, socialite Paris Hilton doesn't exactly dress or act like a pageant queen.

Donald Trump, however, thinks Hilton could be a pageant host, and is negotiating with her to host the Miss USA Pageant, which he owns.

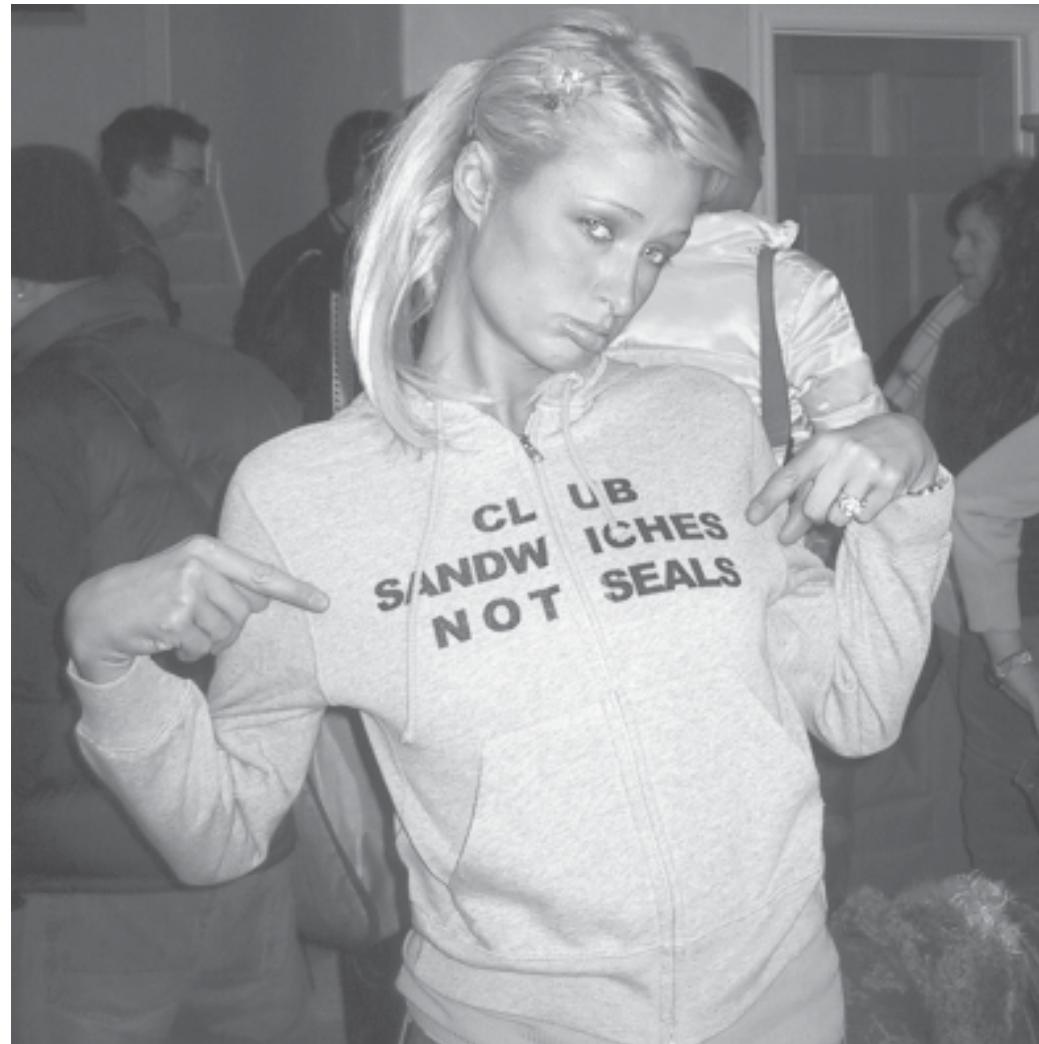
Trump told Us Weekly magazine he got the idea while Hilton's parents, Kathy and Rick, were visiting him at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla. And he said Hilton's infamous Internet sex tape doesn't bother him.

"I've known Paris since she was a little girl," Trump said. "She's a fine girl ... I think she will give the pageant its highest TV ratings."

The 53rd annual Miss USA Pageant is scheduled to air April 12 on NBC, live from the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles.

Paris Hilton wears her Humane Society of the United States' "Club Sandwiches Not Seals" sweatshirt, in Park City, Utah, during the Sundance Film Festival, Jan. 17, 2004 in Park City, Utah.

AP



Film Academy expels member over tapes

LOS ANGELES (AP)—The group that hands out the Academy Awards has kicked out a member for leaking special videotapes of Oscar-contending movies in violation of new rules to keep them out of general circulation.

The board of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences voted to expel the member Tuesday night. Academy spokesman John Pavlik said Wednesday the group was not disclosing the member's name.

Academy officials said the member violated an agreement Oscar voters were required to sign that prohibits them from sharing "screener" copies that studios provide of their awards contenders.

The agreement was put in place last fall over studio concerns that screener copies could be used to make pirated movie videos. The deal allowed studios to encode screeners so pirated copies could be traced back to their original recipients.

Investigators said last month that academy member Carmine Caridi, a 70-year-old actor, admitted sending screener copies to a friend in Chicago. Copies of several films that turned up on the Internet were traced back to Caridi's screeners, investigators said.

Pavlik said the academy would not disclose if Caridi was the expelled member.

Calls to Caridi's attorneys went unreturned.

Singer James Brown files for annulment

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP)—James Brown has filed papers seeking an annulment from his wife, claiming she never divorced from a previous marriage.

Brown was arrested last week in South Carolina on a domestic violence charge involving 33-year-old Tomi Rae Brown.

The 70-year-old Godfather of Soul allegedly pushed the woman to the floor during an argument

in a bedroom of their Beech Island, S.C., home and threatened to kill her while holding a chair over her, according to an Aiken County sheriff's report.

She had scratches and bruises on her right arm and hip and was taken to an Augusta hospital, deputies said.

Brown, who has denied the accusations, was arrested Jan. 28 and released from jail the next

day; hours later, he filed for an annulment.

His attorney, Jim Huff, told The Augusta Chronicle that Brown's wife said she never sought a divorce from Javed Ahmed, whom she married in Houston in February 1997.

If convicted of the domestic violence charge, Brown faces a maximum penalty of a \$500 fine and 30 days in jail.

Aaron Carter's mom fails to show in court

MARATHON, Fla. (AP)—The mother of pop singers Nick and Aaron Carter failed to appear in court for a scheduled arraignment on a battery charge, and a bench warrant for her arrest was immediately issued.

Jane Carter was charged with attacking the girlfriend of her estranged husband, Robert Carter, last month. Sheriff's officials said

she broke a window to enter her husband's home and attacked the couple while they slept.

Carter allegedly pulled 29-year-old Ginger Elrod from the bed by her hair and beat her, sheriff's officials said.

Her \$5,000 bond has been forfeited because of the missed court appearance, officials said. A message left for her publicist was not returned Tuesday.

The alleged fight took place after a meeting between the Carters and their 16-year-old son Aaron, during which the family apparently resolved some financial differences. Aaron Carter, the younger brother of Backstreet Boy Nick Carter, 24, accused his mother of taking more than \$100,000 from his bank account without permission.

O'Donnell postpones work on book

NEW YORK (AP)—Rosie O'Donnell has postponed work on "Celebrity Detox," a book that was supposed to come out this summer.

"She has a lot going on and thought it best to take a breather and revisit the book later," said Jimmy Franco, a publicist for Warner Books, which had reportedly paid seven figures for the book.

No new publication date has been set, Franco said Wednesday. According to Warner's own catalogue, "Celebrity Detox" will "reveal the events that unhinged her desire for the spotlight" and will introduce readers to "the lost little girl turned mega-star."

O'Donnell is currently working on a stage adaptation of a previous book, the best-selling "Find Me," which came out in 2002. "Taboo," a Broadway musical she produced that stars Boy George, closes Feb. 8 after an unprofitable three-month run.

Rosie O'Donnell leaves Manhattan federal court after attending the trial of her friend, Martha Stewart, in New York, Monday, Feb. 2, 2004.



AP

Girl who lost her boyfriend assuages her grief with sex

By ABIGAIL VAN BUREN

DEAR ABBY: My boyfriend of nine months, "Brent," was killed in a car accident. I have been a mess ever since. I dropped out of school and have no job. I do not live with my parents, and I no longer have the love of my life.

One of Brent's best friends, "Doug," and I recently spent two intimate nights together. It was special and felt right.

Doug has had a girlfriend for almost two years. They are expecting a baby any day now. He has told me he wants to break up with her and move away with me because he feels he should look after me.

Another of Brent's good friends, "Brian," is a player. Brian doesn't respect women, but since he and I became close after the accident, he respects and watches out for me, too. One thing led to another with Brian, too, and we have done the deed many times.

I have feelings for both Doug and Brian, even though they don't come close to what I felt for Brent. Am I a horrible person for sleeping with Brent's two best friends after his death? I need advice on how to get out of this mess.

GRIEVING WITH SEX

DEAR GRIEVING: Do not mistake what has happened with Brent's friends for love. It's time you talk to your spiritual adviser, join a grief support group and seek individual counseling. If possible, return to your parents for a while until you get your life back in order. It is important that you complete your education so you can become financially as well as emotionally independent.

P.S. Neither one of the young men you mentioned appears to be solid and mature enough for a serious relationship, so I urge you not to depend on either of them for anything. Both have taken advantage of your vulnerability.

DEAR ABBY: I turned 18 last year. When I started college, I moved in with my grandma on my father's side. My parents were furious. They said I moved out because "Gram" doesn't give me rules or chores.

I moved in with Gram because she doesn't see, hear, drive or even move well anymore. I drive her wherever she needs to go. My parents refuse to believe that I moved out to help Gram. It has reached the point that my parents no longer speak to her—and I no longer speak to my parents.

It was not my goal to make waves in the family. What can I do to fix the problems I've caused? And how can I get everyone on speaking terms again? Please help.

BIG PROBLEM IN A LITTLE TOWN

DEAR BIG PROBLEM: You appear to be the daughter of very controlling parents. At 18, you are old enough to decide where you want to live, and the arrangement you have made appears to be mutually beneficial.

Being a companion to an elderly person in failing health is a heavy responsibility and certainly isn't chore-free. (Could it be that your parents miss your free labor at their house?) It is not your responsibility to "get everyone on speaking terms again." From my perspective, you not only deserve a pat on the back but also a thank-you for taking care of your grandmother.

Dear Abby is written by Abigail Van Buren, also known as Jeanne Phillips, and was founded by her mother, Pauline Phillips. Write *Dear Abby* at www.DearAbby.com or P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, CA 90069.

Good advice for everyone—teens to seniors—is in "The Anger in All of Us and How to Deal With It." To order, send a business-size, self-addressed envelope, plus check or money order for \$5 (U.S. funds only) to: *Dear Abby*, Anger Booklet, P.O. Box 447, Mount Morris, IL 61054-0447. (Postage is included.)

Pastimes

WONDERWORD® By DAVID OUDET

HOW TO PLAY: All the words listed below appear in the puzzle — horizontally, vertically, diagonally, even backward. Find them and CIRCLE THEIR LETTERS ONLY. DO NOT CIRCLE THE WORD. The leftover letters spell the Wonderword.

ANY WAY YOU SLICE IT

Solution: 7 letters

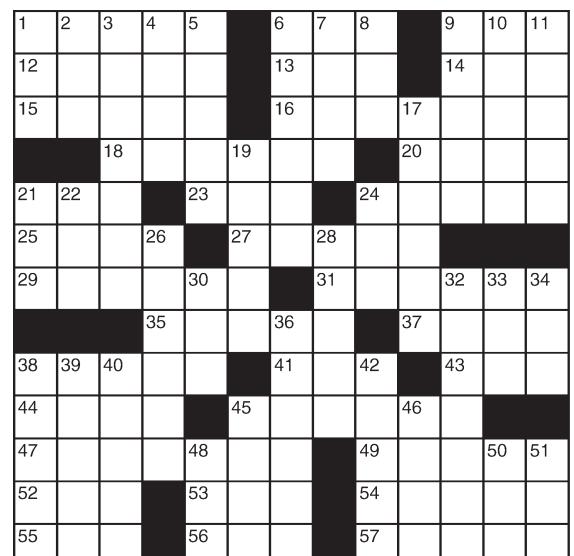
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Allocation, Allowance, Amount, Area, Bite, Blade, Cake, Carvers, Cheese, Chef, Chops, Chunk, Cleaver, Decorative, Diced, Dinner, Eating, Elements, Equipment, Finger, Flat, Food, Fraction, Hands, Instrument, Joint, Julienne, Knife, Loose, Lunch, Make, Paper, Parcel, Recipe, Roast, Sections, Segment, Shave, Sliver, Strewn, Vegetable, Wedge, Whole, Wipe.
Yesterday's Answer: Hurricane
NOTE: Postage and handling charges have changed for The Collected Wonderword. Add \$3 for the first book ordered, \$1 more for each additional book. Volumes 17 and 18 are \$5.95 each, payable to Universal Press Syndicate. Send to WONDERWORD, 4520 Main St., Kansas City, Mo. 64111 or call 800-355-6734, ext. 4615

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS	43	Bran	2	Hole-making	19	Regions
1	Icicles'	source	44	Lecherous	21	Alfred E.
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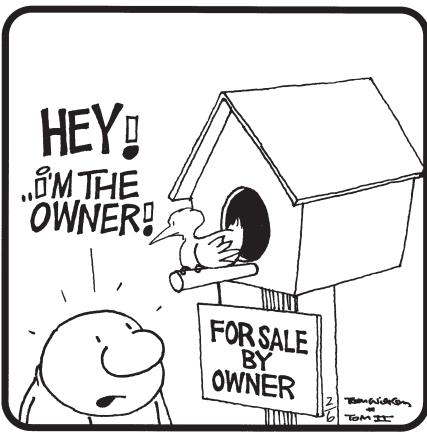
Yesterday's answer 2-6



For answers to today's crossword, call 1-900-226-5955! 99¢ per minute, touch-tone/rotary phones. (18+ only.) A King Features service, NYC.

STUMPED?

ziggy®



Calvin and Hobbes



YOU'D THINK THEY'D CHANGE THE SUBJECT AFTER A WHILE, BUT THEY NEVER DO! THEY JUST KEEP GRIPING UNTIL YOU START TO WONDER, "WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS IDIOT?" BUT THEY GO ON COMPLAINING AND REPEATING WHAT THEY'VE ALREADY SAID!

MAYBE THEY'RE NOT VERY SELF-AWARE. BOY, THAT'S ANOTHER THING THAT GETS ON MY NERVES!

By Bill Watterson

Garfield®



Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate

by Jim Davis



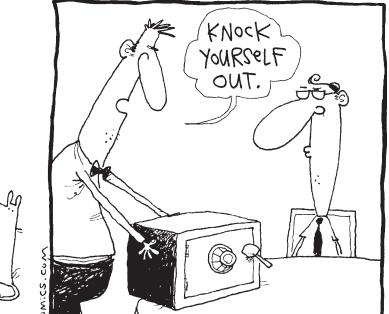
By Glenn McCoy

The Duplex



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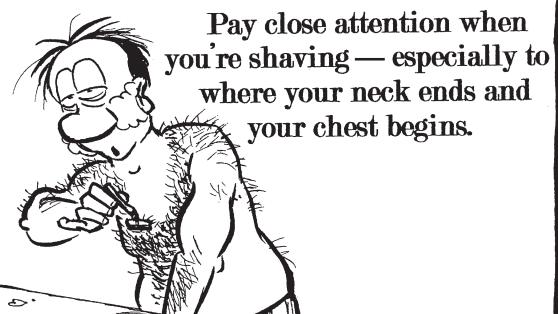
2-6



Adam@home

Adam's grooming tips for men:

No. 5



BRIAN BASSET 2-6 © 2004 UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE

CELEBRITIES BORN ON THIS DAY

Ronald Reagan, Babe Ruth, Bob Marley, Rick Astley

HAPPY BIRTHDAY: Be methodical in your approach and you will make a far greater impact toward the end of the year. Iron out problems that exist so that they don't come back to haunt you just when you think you are about to make it big. Be precise and in control. Your numbers are 6,14,19,23,33,42

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ARIES (March 21-April 19)

You are sitting in a pretty good position right now whether you recognize it or not. Take hold of what you've got and take the plunge. Today, you can turn any negative into a positive. ★★★★

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

Everything you say is likely to get taken the wrong way today. Do the things that are in your control, such as finishing a project or socializing with people who lift you up emotionally. ★★

GEMINI (May 21-June 20)

You can form solid unions if you base everything on truth and working alongside others. Love is in the air, and you will attract people who are capable of holding your interest. ★★★

CANCER (June 21-July 22)

Your relationship with someone to whom you've loaned money may be strained if you can't resolve things in a civil manner. Something that happened in your youth may come back to haunt you. ★★★

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

Your carefree attitude may be attractive to those who don't know you all that well, but to close friends and family you will appear irresponsible. Change your ways if you want to appease the ones you love. ★★★

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

A poor diagnosis is possible if you try to get to the bottom of a medical problem. Allergies, headaches and minor mishaps are likely—but nothing too serious. ★★★

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)

If you join forces with other people who have similar concerns, you will be able to make a difference. New friendships will be solid and lasting. ★★★

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)

This is not the time to trust anyone with your secrets. A love interest may prove to be unworthy of your time and affection. You don't want to jump into anything too quickly today. ★★

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

Nothing will stop you from having a great time. Adventure and travel will be your first choice. You can influence others while you secure a spot for yourself in whatever arena you choose. ★★★★

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

Prepare for the unexpected today. Your efficiency in handling difficult matters will enable you to do what's best for everyone involved. Question those unwilling to pitch in. ★★★

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

You may be a little erratic today, especially if things in your personal life aren't panning out. Question the events that took place over the last couple of days before you move forward. ★★

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)

You can do a lot to make yourself feel better today. Consider what you would like to change in your life and start to make the necessary alterations to ensure a better future. ★★★

BIRTHDAY BABY: You are inventive and will never pass by something that intrigues you. Your fascination with the unusual and your inquisitive nature will inspire all sorts of interesting ideas.

(Need advice? Check out Eugenia on the Web at www.astroadvice.com or www.eugenialast.com.)

Pastimes



NBA STANDINGS					
EASTERN CONFERENCE					
Atlantic Division					
Team	W	L			
New Jersey	31	14			
Boston	26	19			
Philadelphia	24	22			
Orlando	24	23			
Washington	22	24			
New York	19	25			
Miami	16	29			
Central Division					
Indiana	33	13			
Detroit	29	15			
New Orleans	24	22			
Milwaukee	22	22			
Chicago	17	28			
Atlanta	17	29			
Toronto	11	34			
Cleveland	9	37			
Western Conference					
Midwest Division					
Dallas	35	9			
San Antonio	29	16			
Minnesota	27	18			
Utah	27	18			
Houston	24	20			
Memphis	13	31			
Denver	10	35			
Pacific Division					
Sacramento	32	14			
Portland	28	16			
Phoenix	26	21			
L.A. Lakers	20	23			
Seattle	20	23			
Golden State	20	24			
L.A. Clippers	17	28			

NBA STANDINGS

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic Division

Team	W	L
New Jersey	31	14
Boston	26	19
Philadelphia	24	22
Orlando	24	23
Washington	22	24
New York	19	25
Miami	16	29

Central Division

Team	W	L
Indiana	33	13
Detroit	29	15
New Orleans	24	22
Milwaukee	22	22
Chicago	17	28
Atlanta	17	29
Toronto	11	34
Cleveland	9	37

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Midwest Division

Team	W	L
Dallas	35	9
San Antonio	29	16
Minnesota	27	18
Utah	27	18
Houston	24	20
Memphis	13	31
Denver	10	35

Pacific Division

Team	W	L
Sacramento	32	14
Portland	28	16
Phoenix	26	21
L.A. Lakers	20	23
Seattle	20	23
Golden State	20	24
L.A. Clippers	17	28

NBA STANDINGS

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic Division

Team	W	L
Orlando	2	0
New Jersey	1	0
Philadelphia	1	1
Boston	0	1
Miami	0	1
New York	0	1
Washington	0	1

Central Division

Team	W	L
Chicago	1	0
Detroit	1	0
Indiana	1	0
Toronto	1	0
New Orleans	0	0
Atlanta	0	1
Cleveland	0	1
Milwaukee	0	1

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Midwest Division

Team	W	L
Dallas	1	0
Minnesota	1	0
San Antonio	1	0
Utah	0	0
Denver	0	1
Houston	0	1
Memphis	0	1

Pacific Division

Team	W	L
Sacramento	1	0
Portland	1	0
Golden State	0	0
L.A. Clippers	0	0
Phoenix	0	0
Seattle	0	0
L.A. Lakers	0	2

Wednesday's Games

Chicago 99, Boston 96
Indiana 91, Houston 82
Toronto 74, Washington 68
Philadelphia 95, Milwaukee 93
Orlando 100, Miami 86
New Jersey 105, Atlanta 94
Dallas 119, Memphis 108
Minnesota 83, Denver 77
Detroit 86, New York 77
Portland 102, L.A. Lakers 90

Team

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 T

Giants 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 2 - 3

Hustlers 1 0 1 4 2 0 0 5 - 13





SPORTS BRIEFS



Spurs defeat Mavericks, 111-104

Tony Parker scored a career-high 32 points, including seven free throws in the final minute, to lead the San Antonio Spurs to a 111-104 win over the division rival Dallas Mavericks on Wednesday night.

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Saipan Tribune Sports

52 FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2002

Yearend RGA champion tourney tomorrow

The Refaluwasch Golf Association will hold their yearend Club Champion Tournament tomorrow, December 14, at the Lao Lao West golf course.

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SAIPAN TRIBUNE

